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What the Sirico Story Does (and Does Not) Mean

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 18, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

My story about Father Robert Sirico [1]being a pioneer in the gay marriage movement in the 1970s raises many issues. But it also does not raise others. Distinctions are in order.

First, Father Sirico?s case is not like that of Bishop Eddie Long or Rev. Ted Haggard. They were hypocrites, preaching one thing while doing another. Father Sirico, clearly, had a conversion experience and changed his mind about same-sex issues. He is entirely entitled to do that. Father Sirico?s statement is evidence of integrity, not its lack, no matter what you think of his earlier activities or of his present stance on the issue of same-sex marriage.

Second, ours is both a hyper-sexualized culture and one that loves to see the mighty cast down from their thrones. I fear that the publication of my story will result in people, forevermore, referring to Father Sirico as the ?ex-gay? priest. Father Sirico is a man of many interests and ideas. I happen to disagree with many if not most of his ideas, but they cannot be dismissed simply because he once presided over gay marriage ceremonies. We should not reduce anyone to their sexuality.

Third, the lesson, it seems to me, these revelations raise is one of sanctimony. Everyone loves a convert, but one would think that having taken such a circuitous route to the Catholic priesthood, Father Sirico might be less judgmental towards those whose paths do not meet his current standards of orthodoxy. Instead, he regularly rails against those who deviate from the church norms he deems important. He took issue, for example, with the eulogies at the funeral of Sen. Edward Kennedy, noting that the General Instructions of the Roman Missal do not permit eulogies. He recently accused the local hierarchy in the UK of an ?agenda? for having female altar servers at Masses during Pope Benedict?s recent visit. He called out Sister Carol Keehan for reaching conclusions about the health care bill that were different from the conclusions reached by the U.S. bishops? conference.

Sirico was also among those who loudly denounced the University of Notre Dame?s decision to award an honorary degree to President Obama. In a public letter [2]to Notre Dame President Father John Jenkins, which Sirico published on his web site, he wrote: ?I feel compelled to write to you as a brother priest to express my own dismay at this decision which I see as dangerous for Notre Dame, for the Church, for this country, and frankly Father, for your own soul.? He noted that he had given several talks at Notre Dame and had been given a statue of the Blessed Mother after one such talk, and that he was now returning the statue. ?I am returning this statue to your office because what once evoked a pleasant memory of a venerable Catholic institution now evokes shame and sorrow,? Sirico wrote.

?For someone to be so sanctimonious about an appearance by the President of the United States speaking at Notre Dame's graduation, while he's got such skeletons in his own closet, is baffling,? Fred Rotondaro, chairman of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, an organization that supported Notre Dame?s decision to honor the President, told NCR. ?You would think he might be a bit more sympathetic with people and their own conundrums given the complicated way he seems to have left and re-joined the Church.?

That is the principal lesson here. We all struggle with various aspects of our lives. Father Sirico is undoubtedly correct when he writes that the call to conform ourselves to the Truth of Jesus Christ should be the most important task in our lives. But, as his own life demonstrates, different people at different times struggle with how to answer that call and we should respect that struggle. That struggle invites sympathy, not sanctimony, with others. Sirico might have written to Father Jenkins to say he thought he was wrong. The letter he did send to Jenkins reeks of a holier-than-thou posture that ill befits a pastor of souls.

It matters not a whit to me that Father Sirico once presided over gay marriages. It matters to me a lot that he has repeatedly spoken of those who do not share his views as if they were bad Catholics. The television show on which he is a regular guest, seems to exist primarily to call out ?bad Catholics.? It will be curious to see how the folks over at EWTN react to this news. Will he still be a featured guest? Will those who have tried to blame the sex abuse crisis on gay priests cut him off? Conversely, will those Sirico denounces open their hearts to him and his struggles? The story I published is about Father Sirico, but the response will tell more about the rest of us and about our capacity for empathy, our desire for understanding rather than judgment, our willingness to recognize that whatever we think of Sirico?s actions in the '70s or of his views today, he is a fellow Catholic and a child of God.

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