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Cardinal-designate Burke is Wrong (Again!)

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 29, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Just when you thought we might make it through at least a midterm election without any mention of denying people communion, there is Cardinal-designate Raymond Burke launching his crusade for such denial based on his own reading of Canon 915 and, more importantly, on his own reading of the political landscape. Rocco has the clips [1]. Cathy Grossman at USAToday [2]has some context but I am sure most readers know how these controversies play out. What the press corps called the ?wafer watch? in 2004, when Burke told Sen. Kerry he would be denied communion in St. Louis, will be back in2012 with Vice President Biden unless?.Rome steps in.

First, a reminder of why Cardinal-designate Burke is wrong. Burke is considered an expert canonist, but apart from his own diocese and those of a few of his friends, Canon 915 has never been used in this way, as a political battering ram. Of this approach, Cardinal-designate Donald Wuerl said, ?I have yet to see where the canonical approach has changed anyone's heart.? The Burke approach is lousy, and novel, theology. Again, a quote from Wuerl is on point: ?That's the new way now to make your point ... The Church just didn't use Communion this way. It wasn't a part of the way we do things, and it wasn't a way we convinced Catholic politicians to appropriate the faith and live it and apply it; the challenge has always been to convince people.? He could have gone further in his interview with Melissa Henneberger [3]. We do not know what is in another?s heart. Period.

There is another reason Burke is wrong and that is that his stance presumes it is enough to say ?I am pro-life? to earn his imprimatur. Is it? How exactly does the GOP plan to make the government more ?pro-life? than it is now? Is it enough to overturn Roe? In that case, why bother with House races? They have no role in the confirmation of Supreme Court justices. Do we want to criminalize abortion? Who goes to jail? The doctor? The woman? This was the question Sen. Michael bent posed to challenger Ken Buck in the Colorado senate debate the other night. It is the question that Chris Matthews posed to Bishop Tobin last year. It is the question Republicans don?t like to answer.

There is one other thing about Burke?s interview that is, I think appalling. His mis-characterizes the pro-choice position. He says that people hold up abortion as a positive good. Mind you, I think the pro-choice position suffers from a variety of contradictions but except for a few horror stories from the 70?s I don?t think anyone says abortion is a good thing. Those candidates who are pro-choice ? that is, those candidates Burke says it is a sin to vote for ? almost always say that they think of the ?choice? involved as ?painful,? or ?difficult,? and base their reluctance to ban the procedure not out of any bizarre eugenicist motives but out of a sympathy with the condition of the unwed mother facing a crisis pregnancy. To be clear, I do not think that sympathy with such a situation requires us to set aside moral rigor, but neither should moral rigor require us to set aside our sympathy. But, as far as politicians go, Burke should not be in the business of mis-characterisizing others? positions.

What to do? Well, Burke is not going to listen to me. And if didn?t listen to the USCCB when he was here. I think that this issue is only going to be resolved from the top. Next year, before the next presidential election, the U.S. bishops undertake their ad limina visits. Alas ? and for reasons I do not understand (LOL!) ? I am not consulted on the agenda. But, if Pope Benedct XVI wants to do the American Church a favor, he needs to lay

down the law on this issue of denying politicians communion. He needs to tell the bishops that it is lousy theology. In Rome, of course, this issue is not between Democrats and Republicans, it is between theologians and the chief canonist and, as long as Benedict is on the throne, my hunch is that theologians win those debates.

A friend called me after I criticized Burke the day of his nomination to the Sacred College. He questioned the comparison to William Henry O?Connell. My friend agreed that O?Connell was pompous and had other even tougher things to say about him. He said that Burke was a holy man, that if he had been pastor of a rural parish in Wisconsin, his people would love. (I suggested that we put that experiment to the test!) I wonder. When I look at Burke, I see a bully. But even if Burke is kind in ways O?Connell was not, it is his leadership in the Church that is in question. Burke will not listen to his brother bishops. It will be up to Pope Benedict himself to muzzle him. And, I hope he does it soon. If Benedict wants the New Evangelization to succeed, he needs to be heard, and as long as soon-to-be Cardinal Burke is throwing bombs, no one in America will hear what Benedict has to say. I stick by what I wrote about Burke: His elevation to the cardinalate is a sad day in the life of the Church.

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