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McMullen v. Broglio

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 13, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Eugene McMullen has written an essay [1]about chaplains in the military and Archbishop Timothy Broglio?s commentary about keeping ?Don?t Ask; Don?t Tell? at Religion Dispatches. Like McMullen, I found Broglio?s comments nonsensical, even foolish, and offensive. But, McMullen?s essay has its own foolishness.

McMullen includes this sentence in his commentary: ?Chaplains are engaged primarily in a non-sectarian work of care and counsel.?

It is true that military chaplains deal with those outside their own faith, but it is also true that Catholic chaplains provide something unique to Catholic members of the armed forces, specifically, the sacraments. The word ?sectarian? invites images of the Thirty Years War, but if it is sectarian to provide the sacraments to our Catholic soldiers, then three cheers for sectarianism. Care and counsel are all well and good but a nice person or a smart shrink can bring those to the soldiers and sailors. Only a priest can bring the sacraments.

McMullen writes, ?So long as they [chaplains] actually serve in the military, they answer to the president, not the prelate.? This claim stems from a flawed understanding of the First Amendment I suspect of the kind that is on display among those who fight any aid, however indirect, to Catholic school. (In case you missed it, this article [2]by Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Curry examines these mis-readings.) In fact, a Catholic chaplain is answerable to the president for a host of things, but he is also answerable to the archbishop for the exercise of his religious faculties, the doctrinal soundness of his sermons, and his conduct as a priest. And, most of all, the chaplain answers to Jesus Christ.

Broglio was wrong. But in this instance, McMullen?s remedy is worse than the affliction. He may be right about DADT, but he is wrong about almost everything else.

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