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The mess in Phoenix

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

What is going on in Phoenix?

Bishop Thomas Olmsted earlier this year pronounced the excommunication of Mercy Sr. Margaret McBride because she concurred in the decision, made by a pregnant woman whose life was threatened if her pregnancy continued and her doctors and authorized by administrators, to...Ah, there it is. What did the patient and doctors decide?

Did they decide to remove the woman's placenta, properties of which were causing the hypertension that threatened both her life and that of her unborn child, a procedure that had as a secondary and unintended effect the death of the child?

Or did they decide to kill the child that the mother might live? You can't really assess the moral situation unless you speak to the parties involved and discover their intentions.

Bishop Olmsted has met with the hospital officials but evidently the talks have not achieved much. He has now issued an ultimatum to the hospital administrators demanding three things:

1. That they admit the procedure was an abortion;
2. That the hospital comply with a certification process, administered by the diocese, to guarantee compliance with Catholic teachings; and
3. On-going education for hospital personnel in Catholic bio-ethics, overseen by the diocese.

Obviously, I have not been party to the discussions. I will say that Olmsted's second and third requests

seem completely reasonable to me. But the first requirement is difficult, getting to the intention of those who participated in the act.

Editor's Note: See this news alert: **Phoenix hospital deadline extended until Tues. Dec. 21**

Maybe that has been discussed in the meetings, although personal intentions in complicated moral situations are usually discussed in the internal forum of confession not in the external forum of the local newspaper, which shows how the relationship between the bishop and a Catholic institution in his diocese has already gotten way, way out of kilter and everyone should bear that in mind before condemning either the hospital or the bishop. There may well be a back story to this that is opaque to the rest of us.

It is also important to acknowledge that Bishop Olmsted is correct when he states that the bishop's role within his diocese is not that of one ethical authority among many: In Catholic ecclesiology, bishops are the authoritative teachers of the Catholic faith in their dioceses. But it has been obvious to everyone, at least since DeToqueville, that the very idea of authority needs to be expressed differently in a democratic country with democratic mores.

Alas, Bishop Olmsted seems stuck in an attitude more appropriate to the ancient regime. Ultimatums are almost always counter-productive in a democratic culture, and great patience is required on the part of those who wish to claim specific authority.

Apostolic authority is not "earned" in any way. This point cannot be stressed too much. But the question is how one exercises that apostolic authority to achieve the purpose for which it was given, namely, the salvation of souls.

In America today, after so many examples of priestly malfeasance and episcopal mis-government, the bishops have only themselves to blame for the lack of moral authority the culture accords them. They must work tirelessly to regain the trust of their people, not because the Church is a democracy but because the Church has been planted in a democratic culture here in America and evangelization requires attentiveness to a culture one wishes to evangelize. Bishop Olmsted seems tone deaf.

How tone deaf? His letter to the hospital, like his earlier statements regarding the excommunication of Sr. McBride, is notable in many regards. But to my mind, the most glaring is the absence of any reference to God, the lack of a quote from the Holy Scripture, just the usual invocation of "scandal" and the assertion of authority.

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What is it about some of these Roman-trained priests who become bishops and are so artless in how they approach their role? They make public statements that quote canons and ethical directives but have not a single, solitary word from the lips of the Master to relate this situation to the Lord's call to discipleship?

How different Olmsted's letter would be if he started by likening the horrific situation of that mother and her doctors to the agony of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane. You will recall, that was not the disciples' finest hour! How much more persuasive would Bishop Olmsted's statements be if instead of repeating the word "authority" like a mantra, he had made the salient point that the Church's moral teachings must be especially followed in difficult situations, when our emotions can lead us to do very

bad things for the best of reasons.

Bishop Olmsted had to know his letter would be made public: Is this really the best way to fulfill his responsibility to teach the faith? Is this effective teaching?

Yes, the bishop has a unique responsibility to teach the faith of the Church but, like all men and women, he also has the moral obligation to be intelligent.

The Vatican must look with an unblinking eye at how it wants to deal with these bishops who themselves become scandals because they are so out of touch with their own diocese, they find themselves on the defensive, issuing statements like this one from Bishop Olmsted.

Maybe it has been a longtime since Bishop Olmsted counseled a couple in a relationship, but it is rule #1 that there is no real place for ultimatums in a loving relationship, and when you get to the point where ultimatums are being given, the relationship is already frayed, perhaps beyond repair. In Isaiah 42:3, we read "a bruised reed he will not break; and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." I see not a whiff of that sense of pastoral solicitude in Olmsted's letter or public statements.

The Phoenix mess is akin to the conservative dissembling in the wake of the Holy Father's about condoms. This issue is not just the moral law, but the application of the moral law. Bishops have the authority, the divinely given authority, to teach the moral law, but all of us must participate in the act of applying that law to the circumstances of our lives. The vehicle for that application is called conscience.

Olmsted can teach. Indeed, he must teach. But he cannot supplant his own conscience for that of others. He is right that his opinion has a different level of authority from that of other ethicists, but the issue is the conscience of the hospital directors who should be encouraged, should they not, to consult widely among different theological experts about the quandaries they may face.

Instead of giving them ultimatums, the bishop should give them instruction, discuss which moral experts he thinks worthy and which not, and why. It might allow him to actually get to know the people he is hurling ultimatums at.

Unfortunately, you can easily guess that the letters of support heading to Olmsted are telling him to "hang tough," to engage in a "culture war," to "teach those bums a lesson, like you taught that nun!"

I would only ask that the bishop meditate on Isaiah 42:3 before he writes another public statement and think that maybe, just maybe, someone who is claiming -- rightly -- a distinctive authority, and apostolic authority, given by God himself through the sacrament of holy orders, might want to mention the source of that authority, God, a bit more often in letters where he is trumpeting that authority.

Otherwise, he is the most uncertain of trumpets, the naked emperor -- a man who does not even recognize he has squandered his authority and the majesty he intends that authority to arouse.

Otherwise, Phoenix will require a more drastic solution, like Scranton did.

The church in America has suffered too much from out-of-touch bishops, hurling ultimatums and breaking the bruised reeds of humanity.

It may be Advent, but we are all in the garden at Gethsemane now.

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