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How We Mourn Together & How Obama Saved Last Night

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 13, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

I was feeling churlish about the non-denominational memorial service last night as it began. It is at moments like this that I wish we had an established church. Non-denominational tends to turn into lowest common denominator pretty quickly, and we cast our politicians in the roles of preachers, a role for which they are usually ill-equipped and are constitutionally ill-suited: In the face of death, the sure hope in the Resurrection is the only hope available, and Americans squirm when politicians get too doctrinal.

Maybe it was the media coverage of the past few days that accounted for my churlishness. Why is it that tragedies like the massacre in Tucson turn our national news shows into ambulance chasers? Do we really need to hear from the neighbors of the killer? Why should we expect people who have just survived an horrific experience to tell the rest of us how they feel, with a CNN microphone thrown into their faces? The line between the public and the private evaporates more and more precisely when it should be respected and honored, at a moment of grief. The ?culture of death? of which Pope John Paul II spoke, the culture of dehumanization and exploitation, has invaded the culture of death without the quotation marks.

The memorial service was held in a university athletic center. Bad choice. Perhaps it was too much to expect people who are accustomed to going there to cheer on their sports team to refrain from applause. They clapped for the President when he entered. They clapped for the Native American man who led the assembled in a blessing at the beginning of the service. They clapped and they clapped and they clapped. It was bizarre and disconcerting.

?Together We Thrive: Tucson and America? was the title on the cover of the programs at the memorial service last night. That seems an odd title for an event called to remember that for six people, the thriving stopped last Saturday. The phrase put me in mind of those insipid framed photographs one finds in some offices, with pictures of soaring eagles or especially vibrant sunrises, with a smarmy poem enscribed below the eagle and a contentless word like ?Success? or ?Strength? above.

And, there is something unseemly about that ?we.? Yes, the massacre affected us all insofar as it was an assault on our democracy. But, the killings did not affect me the way it affected the parents of Christina Green or the wife of Judge John Roll or the families of the other victims. Grief is not as polymorphously available to us all as that ?we? suggests. Death is the great leveler, but it does not level mourners.

Unfortunately, we now expect our events of official mourning to point beyond the tragedy itself and lead us to a hope-filled future, as if a ?memorial service? was not about memory, and the specific memory of the dead, but about the future which is, of necessity, our future, that is to say, funerals and memorial services are no longer about the deceased. They are about ?me? because everything is about ?me? in America today. Just ask Snooki? Our solipsistic culture requires that events like last night's service not focus on the dead who are not here but that they focus on ?me? and Snooki. It is too much.

Sarah Palin concluded her controversial, videotaped remarks with upbeat, and therefore strange, comments that are another example of this solipsism. ?We will come out of this stronger and more united in our desire to

peacefully engage in the great debates of our time, to respectfully embrace our differences in a positive manner, and to unite in the knowledge that, though our ideas may be different, we must all strive for a better future for our country.? I do not know if the parents of Christina Green will come out of this stronger. I doubt very much that the spouses of the older victims will be stronger for having lost their loved ones. I do not know if Palin will be stronger or not, but this tragedy is not about her, is it?

The President, whom I admire generally, I admire more today than I did before he spoke. He resisted the upbeat. He did not speak about himself. He recalled the lives of the lost, reminding us of the fact, so easy to lose track of amidst all the morbid details of their deaths, that these were vibrant people whose lives were cut short, interrupted by insanity and violence, but once, just a short time ago, filled with laughter and pain and challenges and quietude and all the things that fill a life when it is lived. The President did not indulge in the kind of simplistic, forward-looking mantras. No matter what the program said, the President did not focus on thriving but on remembering. When he pointed to the future, it was with a sense of inter-generational responsibility, invoking the specific memory of Christina Green and challenging the assembled politicians, and all Americans, to live up to the expectations that little girl had for them.

The President?s speech saved the evening. But, next time people, find the largest church or synagogue in the city, and hold the service there. Nix ?Fanfare for the Common Man? as a prelude and have the assembled sing the Navy hymn, ?Eternal Father, Strong to Save,? or the ?Battle Hymn of the Republic,? or a similarly appropriate funeral song. A little solemnity goes a long way. A culture that does not know how to suffer together, but teaches us to hurriedly move on to the future, to me and Snooki, to thoughts of celebrating not mourning, a culture that needs to applaud ceaselessly, this is a dysfunctional culture, an impoverished culture, an unchristian culture.

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