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Abp Dolan on \"60 Minutes\"

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 21, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan was featured on last night's "60 Minutes [1]" and the episode demonstrates one of the main reasons his fellow bishops selected him to lead the USCCB last November: The man radiates personal warmth and he joy in his vocation is evident to all. As our own John Allen, who was the sole expert commentator called upon by CBS, noted, the bishops are aware that they have an image problem and they want to put their best face forward. Dolan is one of their best faces.

Of course, interviews like this in the secular press tend to adopt too easily the perspective of left v. right in their analysis. At several points, host Morley Safer tried to explore those tensions but Dolan has heard all those questions before and he deflected them with ease. There was one moment, however, when Dolan reminded us of something I think we who generally range ourselves on the left too easily forget, that there are some among the faithful who cling to the Church precisely because of her innate conservtism, precisely because there is an ageless quality to the Church's teachings and, in a rough-and-tumble culture, where everything is in doubt, people want some measure of certainty in their lives. A pastor must be concerned with this need and should make no apologies about meeting it. Dolan's particular gift is to demonstrate that there is joy to be found in living in fidelity to the Church's teachings. There is nothing conflicted, or nasty, or puritanical, in this man's orthodoxy. As Dolan himself said, the Church needs to present her teachings without being cast in the role of a "shrill scold" and he is himself the best evidence of a different way of presenting the Church's teachings without appearing to be scolding. That said, perhaps he might want to be a little less fulsome in his defense of Bill Donohue who has cast himself in the role of scold-in-chief.

Dolan was especially strong on the issue of clergy sex abuse. He did not deny the magnitude of the problem. When asked if he hoped there would come a time when the scandal would recede from the stage of public opinion, Dolan said that the issue should not be permitted to recede too quickly. "This needs to haunt us," he said. Of course, as Safer noted, since the interview was conducted, the revelations from Philadelphia have emerged, guaranteeing that the issue will, indeed, continue to haunt the Church.

The best part of the interview, and one which I wish Safer had explored at greater length, showed the cameras following Dolan down the tunnel that connects his residence with St. Patrick's Cathedral. The tunnel emerges at the crypt for New York's archbishops and Dolan showed it to Safer. Safer asked if its not "unnerving" to know where he was going to be buried and to have to walk past it so often. Dolan said he found it "liberating." That adjective was worth some exploration but it is not the kind of thing that appeals to the media. Alas, at the end of the day, it is the liberation to be found in death that is the terra firma of our faith, no matter what our ideological dispositions.

I also wished Safer had followed up with more discussion on Dolan's admission that the large number of former Catholics represents a big problem for the Church. A part of this is, no doubt, the price every religion pays for assimilation with the mainstream culture. There are ebbs and flows in religious identifcation throughout American history. For example, the early nineteenth century saw a relative decline among the more established (and once, formally established) churches in America, the Congregationalists and Episcopalians, while there

was explosive growth among the Baptists and Methodists. Currently, the number of Catholics is buoyed by the large influx of Latino Catholics, another topic I wish Safer had explored at greater length, especially after they included a clip of Dolan on his exercise bicycle practising his Spanish.

I admit that I am a big fan of Archbishop Dolan. We met for the first time more than fifteen years ago when he was rector of the North American College and I experienced the Dolan bear-hug for the first time. We share a much loved, and much missed, mentor in Monsignor John Tracy Ellis. Historians, I believe, tend to make fine bishops precisely because they know that the actions of divine grace are, like the Spirit in the story of Nicodemus, we see the leaves of the trees rustle in the wind, but we know not whence the wind came nor wither to goes. There is an equanimity that comes with historical knowledge and equanimity is a fine and necessary characteristic in a pastor of souls. That characteristic was on full display in the interview, but it was Dolan's love of life and of people and of the Church that shone through most clearly. And that is, as John Allen suggested, precisely why the bishops chose him.

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