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The Moral Authority of Bishop McCormack

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 8, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

I posted earlier this week [1]about New Hampshire?s House Majority Leader, D.J. Bettencourt calling Bishop John McCormack of Manchester, New Hampshire a ?pimp.? And, again yesterday, I called attention to the fracas [2] between Bettencourt and Bill Donohue. I was surprised a bit by the comments, many of which said, in effect, well, Bettencourt may be a blowhard but he is right after all. No, he is not.

The central question is this: What is the moral authority of Bishop McCormack? There are really two questions in that one question, and we need to distinguish them. Each of us as human beings has a certain moral authority. We enhance our personal moral authority when we live with integrity, when our words match our actions, when we take responsibility for our misdeeds, when we persevere through hardships, etc. As the comments suggest, the clergy sex abuse crisis greatly diminished the personal moral authority of many bishops, including Bishop McCormack. He may not have been a ?pimp,? as Bettencourt suggested, but he certainly participated in the cover-up of clergy sex abuse. I wish he and the others who acted in a similar fashion has resigned their offices, to which they brought so much discredit. And, if the hierarchy wants to seriously confront one of the central reasons so many Catholics have left the Church, they have no further to look than their mirrors.

In a truly fine article [3]posted at Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, James Salt explained one of the reasons Bettencourt?s tirade was so wrong. Bettencourt had never questioned the bishop?s moral authority when the bishop came to the legislature to testify against same-sex marriage or abortion. Only when Bishop McCormack spoke out on behalf of the poor, and against budget cuts that would harm the poor, did Bettencourt attack his moral authority. Bettencourt?s moral inconsistency makes him an unlikely hero for those who remain angry about the sex abuse crisis.

Which leads to the second question: what is the moral authority of a bishop? Bishops are successors of the apostles and apostles have a different source of authority from that we associate with personal moral authority. I have called attention before to Soren Kierkegaard?s brilliant essay, ?The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle,? in which he writes: ?If Paul is to be regarded as a genius, then it looks bad for him; only pastoral ignorance can hit upon the idea of praising him esthetically, because pastoral ignorance has no criterion but thinks like this: If only one says something good about Paul, then it is all right?.Such thoughtless eloquence could equally well hit upon the idea of praising Paul as a stylist and an artist with words or, even better, since it is well known that Paul also carried on a trade, claim that his work as a tent maker must have been such perfect masterwork that no tapestry maker, either before or later, has been able to make anything so perfect ? since, if only one says something good about Paul, everything is all right. As a genius, Paul cannot stand comparison with either Plato or Shakespeare; as an author of beautiful metaphors, he ranks rather low; as a stylist, he is a totally unknown name ? and as a tapestry maker, well, I must say that I do not know how high he can rank in this regard. See, it is always best to turn obtuse earnestness into a jest, and then comes the earnestness, the earnestness ? that Paul is an apostle.?

Bishop McCormack ? and you could insert the name of any other bishop really, whether they covered up sex abuse or committed some other gross moral failing ? is an apostle and the authority of an apostle comes not

from within, not from genius, not from good performance of episcopal duties, but from God. The true horror of the cover-up of the sex abuse crisis (the sex abuse itself was horrific enough!) is that men invested with such God-given authority acted so badly. But, that is a very old story. The Gospels are littered with the apostles behaving badly and stupidly. How often does the Master have to explain himself? Did they not all flee when Jesus was arrested? Did not Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, deny Jesus three times? The reason we Catholics were so horrified at the behavior of our bishops in the sex abuse cover-ups was that their actions appeared to us as akin to Peter?s denial and the cowardice of the disciples who fled, and so unlike the actions of the God-man who had just been arrested.

What Mr. Bettencourt failed to grasp was that when Bishop McCormack spoke against budget cuts that harm the poor, he was speaking with the authority of the Gospel. What some progressives fail to grasp is that when Bishop McCormack spoke against abortion, he was speaking with the authority of the Gospel. The definition of a good bishop is one who, despite his personal failings, clings to that Gospel and tries to proclaim it with authenticity. You may argue that Bishop McCormack?s personal failings were so great, that he had forfeited the right, or even the ability, to proclaim the Gospel with authenticity, but you can?t, as Bettencourt did, only raise such an objection when the Gospel itself contradicts your political agenda.

I have not been shy about calling for the resignation of bishops whose personal conduct betrays the Gospel. But, every time I do so, I say a little prayer that I will not find myself among those holding stones, eagerly awaiting the chance to cast the first one at the woman caught in the act of adultery. It is a good prayer for all of us to say. But, we are fooling ourselves when we think that there was some golden age in the life of the Church when the Gospel was proclaimed only by worthy souls. Still, we must proclaim that Gospel. Bishop McCormack did so when he called on the New Hampshire legislature not to balance the state budget on the backs of the poor and the vulnerable. However dull and deadened his moral conscience when he served as vicar for clergy in Boston, his moral voice when he defended the poor was the voice of the Church, indeed the voice of Christ.

A final point. I was reading a book of apologetics the other day and it had many fine and true things to say about our Church, about the beauty of our sacramental system and how the sacramental imagination best encapsulates what we Catholics believe about the availability of grace. Other apologists talk about the logical necessity of the natural law tradition that makes up so much of the Church?s social and ethical teaching, and the manifest need for such teaching to guide our lives and our societies. Others cite this or that aspect of the Church as reasonable, or comforting, or empowering, and note that it is such reasonableness or comfort or empowerment that leads them to remain Catholic. But, the reason to remain a Catholic, the ONLY reason to be a Catholic, is because you believe it is true. You believe God was born of the Virgin Mary and walked upon the earth. You believe Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead. You believe the tomb is empty. And, finally, you believe that our Church, for all of her flaws, for all of the incompetence, for all of the sins committed by her pastors and her people, you nonetheless believe that this Church carries on the saving work of the Master. And if you believe this, then you may disagree with the Bishop McCormacks of the world, you may find yourself horrified at some of their deeds, but still you discern the still flickering flame of faith they proclaim and recall the Master?s warning not to stamp out that flame.

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