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Initial Thoughts on Letter to Boehner

Michael Sean Winters | May. 11, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

A couple of things are especially striking about the letter a group of prominent academics will deliver to Speaker John Boehner [1]tomorrow morning regarding his upcoming comencement address at Catholic University.

As I noted in my post where I printed the text of the letter, the academics do not call on CUA to rescind its invitation to Speaker Boehner. There are times and places where it is appropriate to be censorious, but a university setting is not one of those places and a commencement address is not one of those times. Apart from Holocaust deniers, any university community benefits from having a range of voices on its campus.

One of the most striking, and important, points made in the letter is that many of the budget cuts proposed by Boehner are not just opposed to the Church's social teachings but are "anti-life," especially those cuts that are directed at programs help pregnant women facing crisis pregnancies. There is little any of us can do to dissuade a woman from having an abortion if she has other reasons for seeking to end her pregnancy, but there is something we can do if the principal reasons she desires to end her pregnancy are economic reasons. We can furnish help. Unfortunately, the GOP budget cuts make it more, not less, likely that someone women will turn to abortion because they fear they cannot afford a pregnancy.

Another important feature of the letter is that it is addressed to a Catholic. When some opposed President Obama's appearance at Notre Dame, they cited a section of the USCCB document "Faithful Citizenship" in which the bishops advised that Catholic institutions should not honor those who disagree with fundamental teachings of the Church. That section of "Faith Citizenship" was entitled, "Catholics in the Public Square." President Obama is not a Catholic, so his disagreement with the Church on a range of issues, including abortion, has a different quality than Speaker Boehner's disagreement with the Church on vital issues. If a university wishes to have a Jewish or Muslim or Hindu graduation speaker, and confer an honorary degree upon him or her, should they not do so because that person denies the divinity of Christ? [CORRECTION: The bishops' concern about not giving honors to those Catholics who disagree with fundamental teachings of the Church appeared in a separate document, "Catholics in Public Life," not in "Faithful Citizenship." I regret the error.]

I applaud Speaker Boehner for his efforts, successful in the event, to get the Opportunity Scholarships for DC youth back in the budget. This will help children, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, to go to good schools - again, Catholic and non-Catholic alike - when they otherwise could not afford it. But, that victory does not get him a pass on a budget best described as an embodiment of Social Darwinism.

The ball is now in Boehner's court. It will be curious to see if he addresses any of the concerns raised in the letter when he gives his commencement speech. Given his imperious performance this week, arguing that tax cuts are "off the table" in budget negotiations, I am not holding my breath.

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