NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Ryan & Dolan: The Letters

Michael Sean Winters | May. 20, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

My email inbox filled to overflowing in the minutes and hours after Politico posted its story [1] about the letters exchanged between House Budget Chairman Congressman Paul Ryan and New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan. Ryan's letter is here [2] and Dolan's reply is here [3].

Trying to make sense of the letters appears, at first, to be a Sisyphean task. On the one hand, this is Ryan?s first known dabbling in Catholic social teaching. As for Dolan?s response, he has been very ill-served by whomever suggested he write such a letter. Providing political cover for politicians should not be part of the USCCB President?s brief, especially when it means cutting off USCCB Committee chairs at the knees.

The first thing to note is that if Ryan went looking for an endorsement of his budget bill, he failed to get it. Dolan praises Ryan?s assurances of moral concern, not his budgetary proposals. Dolan focuses his attention on Ryan?s initial letter, not on the budget. Dolan?s letter, on its, face, is a tightly, carefully written text, but he was about to throw it into a political and media environment that is anything but careful.

The second thing to note is the irony of seeing Ryan invoking Catholic social thought so forcefully. This is the same congressman who said he was inspired to go into politics by reading Ayn Rand, and who instructs his congressional staff to read Rand?s works if they want to understand his mind. During his speech introducing his budget, and in many appearances since, as well as on the House floor, Ryan has never before mentioned Catholic social teaching, nor the 25th Chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew, when discussing the moral underpinning of his budget. To be clear: I think Ryan is genuinely concerned that we are saddling future generations of Americans with debt and that this is immoral. Everyone who knows Ryan insists that he is morally serious. But, he is steeped in Rand?s moral vision of human nature and society and, the last time I checked, Rand was not included in the Compendium of Catholic Social Thought.

A third item of interest is the way conservatives claim to survey and invoke the whole breadth of Catholic social teaching, perhaps not as far back as Bellarmine, but at least starting with Rerum Novarum, and yet they all seem to reach into that tradition and pull out the same plum: the few lines that American neo-cons got hoisted into Centesimus Annus, this one about the ?social assistance state? and the way it can lead to ?a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending.? Of course, almost all of what the neo-cons got into Centesimus Annus they failed to see even acknowledged, still less endorsed, in Caritas in Veritate. And, is anyone else tired of seeing these citations to Centesimus Annus used as proof texts the way Fundamentalists cite passages from the Bible?

But, the quote from Centesimus Annus points to another connection and, I suspect, the real ?story? behind these letters. It is all about Milwaukee. Archbishop Dolan was, of course, the Archbishop of Milwaukee before he was translated to New York and Ryan?s congressional district stretches from the Illinois state line to the suburbs of Milwaukee. Both are fun men to be around and, by all accounts, ?good guys.? I need scarcely add that both Ryan and Dolan are Irish. But, the Milwaukee connection may go deeper. The General Secretary of the USCCB,

that is, the man who runs the day-to-day operations, is Msgr. David Malloy. He grew up in Milwaukee. In fact, he went to the same parish as Archbishop James Harvey, the prefect of the papal household. Their pastor was the current Bishop of Lincoln, Fabian Bruskewitz. Archbishop Harvey, in turn, has a long association with George Weigel from the days when Weigel was writing his magnum opus on Pope John Paul II. So, it is entirely possible that the impetus for this exchange of letters came from someone other than Ryan or Dolan.

The immediate problem for Dolan is that whether he thought he was just doing a friend from Milwaukee a favor, or whether he was merely trying to keep channels with the House GOP open, or whether Speaker Boehner said something to Cardinal Wuerl after the letter from 80 academics challenged him and the GOP budget last week, no matter the why or wherefore of this letter, its immediate effect is to frustrate the months-long efforts of Bishops Stephen Blaire and Howard Hubbard, chairs of the relevant USCCB committees, to protect programs that assist the poor from the budget axe. The USCCB has been lobbying on behalf of the poor since its inception. On its face, the Ryan letter does a poor job explaining how his budget cuts achieve that goal.

The larger problem for Dolan is that the media is viewing this exchange of letters as mere cover for the GOP. Providing political cover is not a part of the brief of a President of the USCCB. Keeping the bishops united is. It is vital that in the coming days, Archbishop Dolan explain how this letter to Ryan was not intended to frustrate the positions already articulated by the USCCB. It is vital that he explain how the anti-life cuts in the Ryan budget, from the defunding of anti-malaria programs abroad to the cuts in assistance to women and children at home, meet the standard of defending human life and dignity that is at the heart of Catholic social teaching. And, it is especially important that Dolan and others recognize that the Ayn Rand-inspired vision that animates the Ryan budget does not, in fact, cohere with Catholic social teaching.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/23/2014 - 03:50*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/ryan-dolan-letters

Links:
[1] http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0511/55349.html
[2] http://budget.house.gov/UploadedFiles/RyanLetterToDolan4292011.pdf
[3] http://budget.house.gov/UploadedFiles/DolanResponsetoRyan5_18.pdf