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The Veep at the Vatican

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 6, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

The visit of Vice President Joseph Biden to the Vati [1]can sent tongues wagging. Why was the visit "private?" Would there be a statement from the Vatican similar to that issued after then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a statement that noted the Pope had essentially scolded Pelosi for her stance on abortion? Would tehre be any pictures of Biden's visit? What does it all mean?

Biden, of course, is not a head of state nor a head of government, so it should not surprise that there are differences in protocol between his visit and that of President Obama. And, the Vatican is pretty strict when it comes to protocol.

But, there is another and more significant difference, one that bears on the more general issue of hosting dignataries at Catholic venues. Biden is a Catholic. Obama is not. I hope the Pope did challenge Biden on his stance on abortion. His stance is wrong and, as universal pastor of the Church, that wrongness is specifically the Pope's concern. I hope if Speaker Boehner heads to the Vatican, the Pope will scold him about the cuts in programs that help the poor. The Pope and the bishops do have a different relationship to a Catholic politician than they do with a non-Catholic.

The Vatican did release a photo of the meeting but there was not statement of public chastisement. This, too, is important. I do not fancy that public statements have much effect. Indeed, they may be counter-productive. Was Pelosi more attentive to Catholic concerns after her visit?

Of course, politicians respond to the polis, and the Church is well advised to direct its attention to voters not just to politicians. I have mentioned before that the Church in the United States faces a unique opportunity in the demographic explosion of the Latino vote in this country. There is no reason Catholic Latino voters should not be educated by the Church and registered to vote, and sent in to the public square to demand some price for their partisan allegiance. If Latinos in Texas want to be Republicans they should insist that the Republican Party embrace comprehensive immigration reform. If they want to be Democrats, they should insist that the Democrats reflect their pro-life concerns. If a largely Latino, overwhelmingly Catholic, pro-life Democratic Party emerged in Texas, the political landscape of the nation would change in significant ways.

A little more than a month ago, I was discussing this very prospect with a wise bishop. He pointed out that too often, by the time a candidate is ready to run for office, they have been thoroughly secularized at university or law school or in the hurly-burly of municipal and state politics. Then, let's find ways to get to them in college and teach them both what the Church teaches and the power that comes from organized political action. Let's recruit pro-life Democrats and pro-social justice Republicans to run for office. Let's have speakers from the local Catholic conference go to every Catholic church and talk about how the Church can - and cannot - involve herself in politics.

I am glad the Veep went to the Vatican. I hope he came away with a greater sense of his Catholic identity - it is hard not to when praying before tht omb of the man who was jesus' best friend when He walked upon the earth. And, I hope that in some meeting at the White House, that greater sense of Catholic identity leads him to raise

his voice on behalf of the unborn. I pray for the day when Catholic Democrats can raise their voice in the party on behalf of the unborn and not be ostracized. With some effort and organization, that day might be closer than one thinks. But, the surest way to short-circuit the possibility would be to engage in the kind of public scolding that some on the right seem to desire. There is more to know about Vice President Biden than his stance on abortion. Recognizing that fact, and drawing him closer to the heart and mind of the Church, will yield better results than public scoldings.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-vp-biden-a-catholic-who-supports-abortion-rights-meets-with-pope-in-unannounced-visit/2011/06/03/AGeVjrHH_story.html