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A Star Rising in the West

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 2, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles gave a talk [1]the other day at the Napa Institute on immigration. But, he also spoke about more than immigration. Archbishop Gomez talked about the pressing need, especially for Catholics but truly for all Americans, to re-learn our ?national story.?

Gomez recalled the efforts of Catholic missionaries, many of whom arrived in the southwestern parts of what is now America, and was then ?New Spain,? before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, before John Winthrop discerned his ?city on a hill,? before the founders set pen to scroll. He noted that the very names of many of our cities attest to this early evangelization: Sacramento, Las Cruces, Corpus Christi. Gomez also quoted John Gilmary Shea, the great 19th century Church historian, and first recipient of Notre Dame?s Laetare Medal: ?Mass was said to hallow the land and draw down the blessing of heaven before the first step was taken to rear a human habitation. The altar was older than the hearth.?

The archbishop?s talk had an edge. ?When we forget our country?s roots in the Hispanic-Catholic mission to the New World, we end up with distorted ideas about our national identity,? he said. ?We end up with an idea that Americans are descended from only white Europeans and that our culture is based only on the individualism, work ethic and rule of law that we inherited from our Anglo-Protestant forebears.?

Indeed, the idea of religion being a private matter has its origins in a distinctly Protestant worldview, clouded by Enlightenment ideas, and Gomez proposes, if I read him correctly, the history of Hispanic Catholicism as a tonic for that false idea. I hope he will expand upon that thought in subsequent talks. It is important not only is assessing the role of religion in American culture, it is important for the New Evangelization. The fact that religion is public, not private, is obvious to a Catholic because our faith spills out of our sanctuaries into our schools and our hospitals and our soup kitchens. But, the public nature of faith also is rooted in the historic claim that the tomb is empty. This is, for us, a religious fact, about which we can be, must be, as certain as the fact that I am typing on a computer. Religious facts are different from other kinds of fact, but as Blessed John Henry Newman explained in his *Grammar of Assent* they are facts nonetheless.

Gomez clearly had a point in urging renewed interest in getting the ?American story? right. He argued that if America is to renew itself, it must do so out of its own best traditions, but it must also do so by the same means by which America has always renewed itself: immigration. He throws a well-deserved elbow at the late Samuel Huntington. Gomez writes:

> I worry that in today?s political debates over immigration we are entering into a new period of nativism. The intellectual justification for this new nativism was set out a few years ago in an influential book by the late Samuel Huntington of Harvard called *Who Are We?* He made a lot of sophisticated-sounding arguments, but his basic argument was that American identity and culture are threatened by Mexican immigration.
> Authentic American identity ?was the product of the distinct Anglo-Protestant culture of the founding settlers of America in the 17th and 18th centuries,? according to Huntington.
> By contrast, Mexicans? values are rooted in a fundamentally incompatible ?culture of Catholicism?

which, Huntington argued, does not value self-initiative or the work ethic, and instead encourages passivity and an acceptance of poverty.

These are old and familiar nativist claims, and they are easy to discredit. One could point to the glorious legacy of Hispanic literature and art or to Mexican-Americans? and Hispanic-Americans? accomplishments in business, government, medicine and other areas.

Unfortunately, today we hear ideas like Huntington?s being repeated on cable TV and talk radio ? and sometimes even by some of our political leaders.

Archbishop Gomez is destined to become the first Hispanic cardinal in the history of the U.S. Church. His presentation of the deep and important issues here is thoughtful, well calibrated, and yet also devoid of any finger-wagging or scolding. (Except the well-desrved shot at Huntington!) Gomez is certainly kinder about the motives of the new nativists than I would have been! His words embody the kind of non-defensive religious posture that is so un-Anglo and so quintessentially Latino. And, by placing the political issue of immigration in a larger historical, social and cultural context, he does exactly what religion can and should always do: provide a cultural critique that only religion can provide. This is not a culture war. This is evangelization of culture. Keep it coming Archbishop Gomez!

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[1] http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/immigration-and-the-next-america-perspectives-from-our-history/