

Catholic Identity

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 22, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Last night, a group of Catholic University students huddled around some candles and a sign that read, "Prayer Vigil for Troy Davis" on the sidewalk of the Pryzbyla Center, which serves as the campus' student union. As his scheduled execution at 7 p.m. approached, the students took turns coming forward and extinguishing one of the candles. Finally, the last candle was extinguished. The students prayed silently. Some were in tears. They did not get the word of the last minute delay, as the Supreme Court considered granting a stay of execution. The students dispersed into the night.

If you want to know about "Catholic identity" at CUA, there it is: Prayer in the face of evil. Students, whose lives are not un-busy, taking time to express their solidarity with a man they did not know apart from the evident injustice of what was about to happen to him. Students overcoming all the noisy distractions of this noisiest of cultures, and finding, even creating, silence.

Inside the Pryz, there was a large cutout poster announcing the way the school is celebrating its 125th anniversary. It reads: "Celebrating 125 years with 125,000 hours of service" and had an ascending red graphic to denote that the students and staff have, so far, achieved about one-fifth of the goal of 125,000 hours of community, Christian service. Here, too, is Catholic identity, an understanding that we must teach ourselves and our youngsters what Jesus taught us, that we Christians are to be known by our love.

Then, I read that St. Francis University in Loretto, Pennsylvania, bowed to pressure from the Cardinal Newman Society and dis-invited Ellen Goodman to speak on campus because she has been outspoken in her support for abortion rights. I do not see this as an example of Catholic identity because I do not believe Catholic identity must be so narrow-minded.

The folks at the Cardinal Newman Society would prefer Catholic colleges that never invite anyone who disagrees with anything the Church teaches, which is to say, they see universities not as places where knowledge is acquired, but as places where propaganda is disseminated. Mind you, I would not pay two cents to hear Ms. Goodman, but that's not the point. What if she was profound? What if she had discovered some great avenue of scientific inquiry?

Are we to say that because she "or anyone" who fails to support? Ah, there is the difficulty. What is it precisely that Ms. Goodman fails to support? The Cardinal Newman Society, like Catholic Advocate, like Professor Robert George and others, engages in a shell game here. It is fine to welcome Republicans who disagree with the Church's social justice teachings because, we are told, those social justice teachings require prudential judgment in their application. That is true, but hiding behind their invocation of prudential judgment, they essentially support decimating government programs that assist the poor, defend a radically anti-Christian economic ideology known as the "Austrian school," and provide no alternative programs to help the poor. Should they, too, be banned from campuses.

On abortion, I understand completely, and reject thoroughly, the traditional leftie "out" that "while I oppose abortion personally, I do not want to force my opinion on others." I am not a burglar and I have never been

burgled, but I have an opinion on burglary and I think it should be against the law. But, how should we approach the issue of abortion politically? We Catholics can all agree that abortion is wrong, that it is a sin, that it offends our ideas about human dignity and social justice, especially those of us on the left who are broadly concerned about defending the weak and the vulnerable. But, Professor George tried to get the GOP presidential candidates to commit to a somewhat novel understanding of how the 14th Amendment can work in approaching the abortion issue, and they didn't bite: Should they be barred from St. Francis University too? Overturning *Roe v. Wade* would achieve what precisely? Kicking the issue back to the states where all but a handful would enact *Roe* as a state statute within a matter of weeks, while filling NARAL's fundraising coffers. Supporting a Constitutional Amendment that declares a child a person from the moment of conception would align our Constitution with our Catholic beliefs, but go ahead and try imprisoning women who still procured abortions anyway as murderers, and see how long that political arrangement lasts!

More importantly, it seems that having overly strict policies regarding who can and who cannot speak on campus risks losing too much of our identity, as universities per se, but also as Catholic universities, unafraid to defend the capability of reason to reach moral truths. I hope Catholic universities find way to give positive expression to our commitment to life, as those students praying outside the Pryz did last night. As the many college students who will march in the March-for-Life will do next January. As all the volunteers who help out working with the elderly do whenever they evidence the love of Christ for the weak and the poor and the vulnerable. But, need we be so censorious?

Having Ellen Goodman on campus to speak on an issue would not, I suspect, turn St. Francis University into a hotbed of NARAL activism. Jerry Falwell once got flak for inviting Sen. Edward Kennedy to address the students at Liberty College, as it was then known, and Falwell correctly said that if one speech by one man could undo all their efforts to form Christian scholars, they hadn't done a very good job. It is shocking to think that the Cardinal Newman Society ? and I am sure Newman would be shocked to find such crude thinkers invoking his name ? is less tolerant of diverse opinion than Rev. Falwell, but there it is.

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