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Protecting the Elderly: All Hands on Deck

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 27, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

On September 18, Cardinal Sean O?Malley of Boston delivered a powerful sermon at the Red Mass in his see city. The Red Mass is an event held in many cities, dating back to the Middle Ages, at which the bishop calls down the Holy Spirit on the assembled members of the judiciary and the legal profession as they begin their new term. The exquisite Sainte-Chapelle was the site of the annual Mass in Paris.

O?Malley chose the occasion, appropriately enough, to address the recent decision by Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakely to allow a proposed referendum on euthanasia to begin soliciting signatures so that it can be put on the ballot in the Bay State. The sermon is worth reading in toto, and you can do so by clicking here [1], but I want to focus on one passage specifically:

> Today, many people fear the prospect of a protracted period of decline at the end of life. They fear experiencing pain, losing control, lingering with dementia, fear of being abandoned, fear of becoming a burden on others.
> We as a society will be judged by how we respond to these fears. We must devote more attention to those who might feel that their life is diminished in value or meaning, they need the love and care of others to assure them of their inherent worth.

Cardinal O?Malley?s comments put me in mind of a conversation I had with a Catholic intellectual who said he thought that as the cost of caring for the elderly increased, they would increasingly become the target for budget cutters on the right and under cultural pressure from the left to avail themselves of euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide. It is undoubtedly the case that the cost of caring for the elderly will loom larger and larger: If health care costs had not exploded, there would be no federal budget problem. My friend said he hoped that both the Catholic left and the Catholic right would come together to defend the elderly. I hope so too.

Categories are difficult things: people are more complex than the categories we create to explain human behavior. Nonetheless, broadly speaking, we can say that in the public realm, the Catholic right tends to focus more on life issues such as abortion and euthanasia while the Catholic left tends to focus on social justice issues like fighting poverty and providing for the common good. For both groups, the most determined opposition is found among libertarians who believe that the only proper goal of society is the maximizing of individual freedom, but both political parties have allowed some form of libertarianism to infect their inner core: Democrats allow libertarian sentiments to inform their approach to abortion and gay marriage and Republicans cite libertarian theorists to defend their attacks on government social programs.

Conservative Catholics, however, decline to adopt a libertarian approach to the issue of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. Liberal Catholics decline to adopt a libertarian approach to Medicare and Social Security, the two programs that do the most to guarantee that our elderly live without fear for their economic circumstances or for the cost of their health care. It is time for the bishops to say to the entire community of Catholics in America: All Hands On Deck! We are going to defend the elderly and we need both conservative and liberal Catholics to achieve this.

Liberal Catholics are uniquely placed to make the case to fellow liberals that the movement for euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide puts tyranny terribly close to home. In our utilitarian culture, it is not hard to imagine that an elderly person with expensive and cumbersome medical needs, will feel that they have become a drain on their families and their society, that they have nothing left to contribute, that they are expendable. They are already vulnerable, and it is not difficult to see how others could exploit that vulnerability to encourage them to hasten their end. Tyranny can come through coercive social attitudes as surely as it can come from the coercive power of government.

Conservative Catholics are uniquely placed to say to their fellow conservatives: Sorry, but health care for the elderly is not just a line-item in the budget and it is never going to be susceptible to a market-oriented solution. No matter how much you value the need to balance the federal budget, such balancing cannot occur on the backs of the elderly. Nor will any insurance company ever devise a business plan that makes it profitable to insure the health of the elderly. But, those facts do not absolve us as a culture from the need to care for the elderly so we have devised Social Security and Medicare so that the elderly can avoid poverty and have their essential medical needs met without worrying about the cost. The rest of us should worry about how to pay for it: If you have attained the ripe age of 65, your worries should be few, you have given this country your most vigorous years, and you have earned the right to expect the rest of us to care for you.

We Americans like to trumpet our self-image as rugged individualists, a phrase that always gets stuck in my throat, and certainly should get stuck in the throat of libertarians from Western states that have benefited so thoroughly from federal water projects. Be that as it may, excessive ideas of individualism are alien to Catholic teaching. We Catholics know that we are bound one to another not as a conglomeration of rugged individuals but as brothers and sisters, a relationship founded in the common Fatherhood of God. To fight off the libertarian challenges to caring for the elderly and defending their God-given human dignity, challenges from the budget-cutting right or the euthanasia advocacy of the left, we need all hands on deck. Here is an issue where the Church has much to teach the culture and where Catholic partisans can use the relationships they possess with their political bedfellows to advance the cause of human dignity. In the long history of the Catholic Church in this country, we Catholics have given many things to our culture. Overcoming our political differences to defend the elderly is a thing we Catholics can do now. Together, we need to fight for Medicare. Together, we need to fight against physician assisted suicide and euthanasia. Together, we must defend the elderly.

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[1] http://www.bostoncatholic.org/Utility/News-And-Press/Content.aspx?id=21846