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

MSW on Roberts' \"The Emerging Church\"

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 18, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

My colleague, Tom Roberts, has written an important book. *The Emerging Catholic Church: A Community?s Search for Itself* [1] presents a report about and, to a certain degree, the case for, liberal Catholicism, and I have not read a better presentation of that case anywhere. It is a case with which I have more than my share of disagreements, to be sure, but it is a case that needs to be considered and well-stated.

Roberts is a reporter first and last, and the strongest parts of the work are the portraits he draws of people and places. As he describes Sacred Heart Church in Camden, you almost feel like you are sitting in one of its pews, but not for long, because the rambunctious pastor, Father Doyle, will be along in a minute with a project on which he needs your help. Roberts? reporting on his travels through the poor regions of New Mexico, and the people he met there, is especially captivating. Good reportage is rare these days. To note only that we, as a culture, have gone from Martha Gellhorn to Anderson Cooper (still more from Walter Lippmann to Andrew Sullivan) is to note an intellectual decline. Roberts? ability to listen long and hard to get the story, and then re-state it sympathetically but critically, is the essence of solid reportage and it is found on every one of the pages of this book.

Roberts also displays a felicity with language that helps the reader. I am tired of ?important? books that seem designed by their author and editors to be abstract and abstruse. Complexity of ideas does not eliminate the need for simplicity of expression.

That said, for me, the first half of Roberts? book makes for very slow reading but not because the author was unclear. Roberts tackles the sex abuse crisis, re-telling a story first told largely in the pages of NCR, but with the advantage now of some hindsight. Somehow, living through the crisis, we were all aware of its horrific quality, but now, seen in the after light, and compressed into one hundred pages, it seen to be oppressive. I had to put the book down every four or five pages. This is a measure of Robert?s success as a writer and reporter: A story this grim, this filled with the broken timber of humanity in all its frailty, stupidity and evil, must be told in such a way that it leads the reader to grief, to an overpowering grief. Flipping the pages of this tale should not be easy and Roberts brings the reader into the full horror of the crisis and gives a bracing account of its consequences. To do otherwise would be intellectually and morally dishonest. These pages are painful to read but how could they be otherwise?

As noted above, I do not share the ecclesiological lens through which Roberts views the Church. He writes approvingly of those who seek a more democratic ethos within the Church. That prospect terrifies me. On the Age of the Tea Party, it need scarcely be demonstrated that democracy can be hijacked by ill-informed people, motivated often by base emotions. They may have been able to capture one house of Congress, and are causing great harm to the commonwealth today, but I would fight tooth and nail to keep them from control of the Church. Demagoguery can be found on the left and the right: Huey Long was as dangerous in his way and in his day as the Tea Party is in its way and in our day. But, demagoguery has difficulty navigating the salons of the Vatican. Yes, there are problems with the court-like culture of the Church: The case of Father Maciel proves that. But, he came a cropper faster than did, say, the foolishness of trickle down economics that still infects

America?s political culture precisely because it has found a popular following.

I celebrate the importance Vatican II attached to the role of the laity. But, it is clear to me, too, that some in America heard the phrase ?The People of God? and heard it with ears attuned to the opening words of the Constitution, ?We, the People,? and in confusing the two have misunderstood the essential nature of the Church. In a democracy, everything truly is up-for-grabs. It is not so and it cannot be so in the Church. Everything is not up?for-grabs in the Church. Democracy inculcates values that are antithetical to those the Church proclaims. In a democracy, the protean sensibilities of the self are celebrated, we honor self-made men, we preach the limitlessness of human possibilities. Democracy is impatient, noisy, pushy, self-assertive. In the Church, we cannot ignore those personal values a democracy shuns: obedience, poverty, chastity, a willingness to endure suffering, quietude.

Nowhere is the gulf between the two visions greater than on the issue of authority. Again, democracy requires a notion of authority as rooted in popular consent. Some have pointed to the sensus fidelium, the sense of the faithful, as the ecclesiastical equivalent of democracy, but they overlook the significance of the word ?fidelium.? Democracy includes the faithless in its plebiscites. The Church cannot. Put differently, while democracy has a certain allergy to dogma, and indeed in our own day and at the time of the Founders, ?dogmatic? is an adjective usually hurled as a slur, the dogmatic principle is at the heart of our Christian faith and dogma is not up-for-grabs, it is a given.

Roberts cites the example of the decision by Bishop Thomas Olmsted to excommunicate Sister Margaret Mary McBride because of her participation in a decision to perform an abortion at a hospital in his diocese. She argued that, in effect, the abortion was indirect and permitted. Olmsted argued that it was a direct abortion and forbidden. Roberts rightly notes the inequality of power in the relationship between bishop and sister. He rightly notes that Olmsted?s exercise of his authority was clumsy at best. He cites experts who testify to the fact that the decision was enormously complicated and difficult, although it is especially at such times, it seems to me, when we must be careful to follow our laws carefully. People in difficult situations are the most prone to make horrible decisions, are they not? There is a reason that the word ?collaborator? has such a terrible ring in the ear. But, my objection to Olmsted?s decision is not Roberts? objection. With Roberts, I agree that the Bishop was ham-handed. I agree that Olmsted should have at least acknowledged Sister McBride acted in good faith. But, my chief difficulty with Olmsted?s decision was that, in announcing it, he issued a multi-paragraph, two page statement that cited canonical authorities and official documents to counter the arguments of the ethicists and theologians on the other side, but he did not once mention the name of God. A bishop?s authority is apostolic, it is given by God Himself. We do not commend St. Paul because he was an adroit wordsmith, or a refined theological thinker, still less because he was a fine tentmaker. We honor him, and treat his words as canonical, because he was an apostle.

But, reading Roberts examination of those whose views are more progressive than mine own, I was reminded of something that those of us who adhere to a more conservative ecclesiology too often neglect. The ?lefties? in the Church seem always to be performing good works. They seem always to exhibit great love. They preach with their deeds not just with their words. They embody, in ways some on the right do not, the Church of Love.

In his retreats, Hans Urs von Balthasar would often contrast St. John and St. Peter, the first representing the Church of Love and the second the Church of Authority. Von Balthasar noted that the Church of Love always runs ahead of the Church of Authority, just as John got to the tomb first. But, John then stood aside and let Peter catch up and enter the tomb first. Von Balthasar would recall Peter?s jealousy of the unique relationship between Jesus and John. He recalled the last scene in the last Gospel, when Peter expresses his jealousy of John by asking what will happen to him in the Kingdom and Jesus upbraided Peter harshly. Von Balthasar comments:

> ?It is not [Peter?s] business to know exactly where the boundaries between the official Church and the Church of love are to be found?.The last thing said to the servant Peter, the last word of the Lord in the

Gospel, is the watchword for the Church and theology in every age: ?What is that to you???

Von Balthasar was also keen on the importance of aesthetics in the life of the Church and in its theology especially. He understood both that beauty was as essential to the human person as bread and water and that, for the Christian, the crucified Christ is the form of the beautiful. In the past several months, I have come to know my colleague Tom Roberts through almost daily phone calls. In what has been an especially painful time for me personally, his friendship has become a source of both comfort and light. I see in the man what I see in these pages he has written, a commitment not only to the importance of the written word but to the beauty of the written word. He crafts his vignettes with care, his analyses evidence a respect for the reader and for the reader?s intelligence, he writes with ease and clarity. Much that is written about the Church is dull and tendentious, but Roberts? essays are fair-minded and incisive. He speaks powerful truths in these pages. Everyone should read this book.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/01/2015 - 03:18*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/msw-roberts-emerging-church

Links:
[1] http://www.amazon.com/Emerging-Catholic-Church-Communitys-Search/dp/1570759464/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1318941061&sr=8-2