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Paul Ryan: Champion of Dissent

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 11, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Mitt Romney?s choice of Congressman Paul Ryan to be his running mate is electrifying. But, electricity is dangerous at times and, in this instance, Ryan is standing in a pool of watery dissent from Catholic Social Teaching that has existed on the Catholic right for some time.

In 1961, William F. Buckley published a critique of Blessed Pope John XXIII?s encyclical, Mater et Magistra, Mother and Teacher. Buckley?s article was entitled, ?Going the rounds in conservative circles: ?Mater, si, Magistra, no.?? The phrase came from a not-yet converted Garry Wills in a telephone conversation with Buckley. It was the first significant instance of public dissent from the magisterium of the Church by an American public intellectual. Note the date: 1961. Before the Second Vatican Council. John XXIII?s encyclical was not a fruit of the Council. It was based on a long line of Church teachings, rooted in the anthropology and ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas, and explicitly applied to modern social, economic and political circumstances beginning in 1891, with Pope Leo XIII?s encyclical Rerum Novarum. The basic threads of Catholic Social teaching were developed further by Pope Pius XI and Pope Pius XII. All before the Council, all before ?dissent? became a phenomenon associated with the Catholic Left. The teachings from which Buckley then, and Congressman Ryan now, dissent are traditional teachings, rooted deeply in an understanding of the human vocation.

Buckley, of course, would not go as far as Ryan. One has a hard time imagining Buckley heaping praise on Ayn Rand as Paul Ryan has done. (Of course, Buckley had actually known her.) Here is Buckley [1]: ?Her scorn for charity, for altruism, was such as to build up an unfeeling system.? ("Unfeeling system" seems to be a perfect description of the Romney-Ryan worldview!) Buckley also recalled her saying to him, ?You are too intelligent to believe in God.? Here is Ryan, in a 2009 campaign video [2]: ?Ayn Rand, more than anyone else, did a fantastic job of explaining the morality of capitalism, the morality of individualism and, to me, this is what matters most.?

Despite Ryan?s reputation as a serious intellectual, it is difficult to see how deep his intellect actually runs if he can so uncritically praise such a hateful human philosophy as Rand?s. How hateful? How unChristian? Here is a taste of her worldview, from her novella Anthem:

> *I am done with the monster of ?We,? the word of serfdom, of plunder, of misery, falsehood and shame.*
>
> *And now I see the face of god, and I raise this god over the earth, this god whom men have sought since men came into being, this god who will grant them joy and peace and pride.*
>
> *This god, this one word:*
>
> *?I.?*

Serfdom? Really? All from the little word ?we?? I understand that, in 1937, Rand had reasons for fearing the collective in ways that seem remote to us today. But, talk about throwing the baby out with the bathwater! Surely a woman as purportedly intelligent as she would have known that not every instance of collective social

expression was fascist or communist. Surely she could have recalled the long tradition of ethical teachings about the Common Good that informed the Catholic worldview or the Covenant theology that informed certain strands of Protestant theology. Alas, Ms. Rand was not so much of a fan of religion, as this video shows.

Congressman Ryan has, this year, tried to step away from Rand. He told an interviewer at the National Review [3]that he rejected her philosophy, offering a preference for the epistemology of St. Thomas Aquinas. (Alas, I did not know the critical issue for a congressman or putative vice president was epistemology!) But, it is hard to step away when you had previously told a Washington audience, ?The reason I got involved in public service, by and large, if I had to credit one person, one thinker, it would be Ayn Rand.? A man can change his views, but it is hard to run from one?s biography as Ryan is about to discover. More importantly, if in 2005 he was willing to credit Rand with inspiring his entire career, and in 2012 is rejecting her philosophy, can Mr. Ryan point to a single change in his views on a single policy that has resulted from his conversion from Rand acolyte to Rand apostate? Surely such a shift in weltanschauung should produce some change, no? Or does Ryan consider philosophy to be like an set of second-hand clothes, the kind of thing that comes easily off and on? Is this the intellectual firepower of today?s GOP?

Mr. Ryan has taken to invoking Catholic Social Teaching, and especially the concept of subsidiarity, to defend his budgetary schemes. Alas, he could not tell the difference between subsidiarity and sausage. He uses subsidiarity to protest against federal government programs. It is true that subsidiarity advocates resolving all social, political and economic issues at the level of social organization closest to the individual. But, it is a two way street. If lower levels of social organization ? the family, the community, local government ? cannot solve an issue, then it is incumbent upon the higher levels, like the federal government, to step in. Subsidiarity, after all, comes from the Latin word subsidium, help. If Mr. Ryan were advocating innovative local and state programs to help the poor, his pleas for less federal spending might be credible. As it is, he is not. He wishes to slash federal spending on programs that help the poor so he can provide the super-rich with more tax breaks and hope that the miracle of the Unseen Hand of the Market will fix every social ill. Did he sleep through the autumn of 2008? Does he really believe that the market can fix everything?

I believe with every fiber of my being that the gravest ideological threat to the America I love is the rise of libertarianism. On the left, libertarianism focuses on issues of pelvic policy, resulting in the embrace of the most liberal abortion laws in the world. On the right, libertarianism results in social policies best labeled social darwinism. I reject the libertarianism of both left and right, although at least Rand was consistent in her libertarianism, applying it to everything. In our day, however, because our culture tends to reduce all of us to our economic status, advancing a false anthropology that sees the human person as homo economicus and homo consumericus, I believe it is the libertarianism of the right that is the more dangerous. Their penchant for reducing the human person to calculations of effectiveness and utility bode ill not only for programs that benefit the poor and the aged, but for core issues like the fight against euthanasia.

The most significant bulwark against the rise of libertarianism is Catholic Social Teaching, and the centrality of such key concepts as the Common Good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity and solidarity. These have nothing to do with the inflated ideas of human autonomy that animate Ryan and Rand. These core Catholic ideas also have nothing to do with the collectivist schemes of fascism and communism, not least because these Catholic ideas predate those modern enormities by centuries and are rooted in a simple, dogmatic belief: The common brotherhood of man is rooted in the common Fatherhood of God. That dogmatic belief obviously carried no weight with Ms. Rand. It is far from clear that it carries any weight with Mr. Ryan. But, that is the issue. It is not about ?prudential judgment? in discerning alternative economic strategies. Mr. Ryan has put forward no strategy for assisting the poor, protecting the vulnerable, guaranteeing health care to all. He simply wants to roll back the role of government to pre-FDR days. And, to be clear, to achieve his goal, he is willing to engage in explicit dissent from years and years of explicit magisterial teaching. Dissent may not bother non-Catholics. It may not, in this instance, bother some Catholics. But, I look at our socio-cultural landscape and think Catholic Social Teaching is the only thing that can save our ideologically confused, socially centrifugal

culture from itself. Ryan?s willingness to dissent from it ? and for what? for Rand? ? is not only bothersome. It is dangerous.

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