

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 24, 2012 at 8:16am

+Dolan at the GOP Convention

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

The fallout over the news that Cardinal Timothy Dolan will give the benediction on the final night of the Republican Party Convention continues. It should not surprise Catholics that a symbol should take on such enormous meaning but, ask yourself: Can you name the priest or pastor who gave the benediction at the 2008 conventions? I can't. So, why is this year different?

The nation's politics could scarcely be more polarized. You have to go back many years, to 1800 and 1860 and 1932, to find a campaign in which the two competing parties are so divided on core principles and so willing to turn disagreements about policy into a meta-narrative in which the charge of "un-Americanism" so easily falls from the lips of our politicians. President Obama is not a European socialist who hates America. Paul Ryan is not an ogre. But, there are many people who think these things and their thoughts are nourished nightly on cable news.

Usually, tough election battles are followed by the winners coming together to achieve what is best for the country. That did not happen in 2008. Sen. Mitch McConnell famously said that his party's number one objective was to ensure that Obama would be a one-term president. That objective is not listed in the Constitution as one of the goals of Congress. But, over the past few decades, and on both sides of the aisle, politicians have adopted this scorched earth approach to politics, making compromise a cuss word, and failing in their Constitutional duty to "promote the general welfare." Only part of this has to do with philosophic differences. Much of it has to do with the emasculation of candidates by campaign staff whose only charge is to win the election.

The rise of the Tea Party added new venom to the mix, and not just venom but some profoundly kookie ideas. Todd Akin is only the most recent example of someone who believes whatever he has heard that feeds his anger and his prejudices. Dinesh D'Souza, who first charged Obama with having a radical,

African, anti-colonialist mindset and is about to release a new infomercial to bolster his case, may be more sophisticated than Akin but is no less kookie in his core ideas. The one-sided view of the world that Sean Hannity spews forth every night feeds the beast. And many evangelical pulpits do the rest, preaching a version of American exceptionalism that is as revolting politically as it is historically uninformed and theologically pernicious.

Democrats must take their share of the blame too. Mr. Obama is to be faulted for failing to do the schmoozing with GOP leaders that might take some of the edge of their disagreements. And, the Democrats are increasingly beholden to organized interest groups like NARAL and Emily's List who are trying, with some success, to turn the party away from its historic vocation as the champion of the working class into a party that is primarily defined as the champion of lifestyle choices appealing to upper middle class women in the suburbs. Nate Cohn's article in the New Republic, to which I called attention the other day, explains why President Obama is almost uniquely susceptible to such appeals.

There are deeper issues to be sure. In this morning's Post, Melinda Henneberger's article has a quote from Democratic House Leader Nancy Pelosi about Congressman Akin's comments about "legitimate rape": "But this is not about abortion: Let's put that aside. Abortion is something you can agree to disagree on, but this shows a disrespect of women that's beyond that." I have called attention before, and will do so many times in the future, to this core problem with modern democracies, a problem rightly characterized by Brad Gregory in his book "The Unintended Reformation" as the replacement of a substantive ethics of the good with a formal ethics of rights. It turns out that abortion, and other issues, is not something we can "agree to disagree on." But, our constitutional systems lack the means to address such difficulties. The replacement of a substantive ethics of the good with a formal ethics of rights is an issue that keeps me awake at night and it points to one of the problems frequently found on the right: The problem is not the 1960s but the 1560s.

Of course, for Catholics, the current polarization in our political life was epitomized by the HHS contraception mandate. One side charges the other with a "war on women" and the other responds by claiming a "war on religion." But, in January, most Catholics, left and right, were united in opposing the mandate. That changed, and I detailed why it changed in an essay at the Danforth Center's "Religion & Politics" which you can read here. But, why were RCs so united, at least for a little bit? Because even though our laws have not recognized the *Libertas Ecclesiae* since Henry VIII, our culture did. The Church has been free to conduct her ministries without undue interference from the government. Religious freedom is not absolute: No one thinks the U.S. government was wrong to insist that Mormons abandon polygamy. And, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (#2109) makes it clear that the exercise of religious liberty is subject to the common good, going further than Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae* which only required that the exercise of religious liberty be constrained by the need for public order.

The *Libertas Ecclesiae* is an idea worth defending – especially for liberals, as Lew Daly demonstrated in his article last November about the sorry legal situation of groups like labor unions in a legal culture dominated by an understanding of rights as exclusively the possession of individuals. Certainly, Article 13 of *Dignitatis Humanae* is clear – more clear than any other part of that text – on this issue:

Among the things that concern the good of the Church and indeed the welfare of society here on earth-things therefore that are always and everywhere to be kept secure and defended against all injury-this certainly is preeminent, namely, that the Church should enjoy that full measure of freedom which her care for the salvation of men requires. This is a sacred freedom, because the only-begotten Son endowed with it the Church which He purchased with His blood. Indeed it is so much the property of the Church that to act against it is to act against the will of God. The freedom of the Church is the fundamental principle in what concerns the relations between the Church and governments and the whole civil order.

As Russell Hittinger demonstrated in his essay on *Dignitatis Humanae* in the book *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition*, this particular section of the document was concerned to bury, once and for all, the *“cuius regio, eius religio”* understanding of the role of religion in the public square leftover from the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. But, it was still on the mind of the Council Fathers in 1965: The Chinese Patriotic Church was an obvious example of the maxim.

But, let us leave the deep and difficult realm of ideas and get down to the brass tacks of politics for a moment. Given the fallout from the HHS mandate debate, it is unsurprising that the bishops of the United States should look at the Democratic Party with renewed suspicion. I place the blame for this squarely on the Democrats, first and foremost on President Obama who told Cardinal Dolan he would fix the problem and then, under pressure from groups that hate the Church, caved and did not fix the problem. But, I also want to assign some measure of blame to those Catholic Democrats who are, in their hearts of hearts, pro-life, but who have been unable to find the courage to stand up to the increasingly rigid pro-choice stance of their own party. Nothing has undermined the historically good relations between the Catholic Church and the Democrats as the politics of abortion. Too many Democrats are willing to forget that *“we can agree to disagree”* and move on to other topics. Catholic Democrats should serve as a thorn in their party on this issue. They should find the courage of their convictions.

Advertisement

The politics of abortion has poisoned the willingness of the Catholic left to reach out to the bishops and cultivate relationships. The Catholic Left has also failed largely to identify how deeply hostile to core Christian ideas the libertarianism on the right goes. The Catholic right is very good at cultivating relationships, although it is less good at draping its arguments in sound theology. And, I think it is fair to assume that the bishops have concluded that while they can expect nothing from the Democrats, they can get the GOP to at least listen to them and act in private. I am thinking of last year's decision by the House leadership to endorse the *“Circle of Protection,”* in budget negotiations. The House GOP leadership did not trumpet this accommodation, to be sure, and the Ryan budget resolution they passed this year goes in a distinctly different direction, raiding the same programs they had pledged to protect. The bishops must be careful here: If Romney were to win and the GOP were to take the Senate and keep the House, I am not sure that the GOP would be as willing to keep the budget axe away from Medicaid and food stamps as they were last year. And *“this is really important”* the bishops have to think deeply about the libertarianism of the right and the threat it poses to core Catholic doctrines. I have consistently warned that the libertarianism of the right on economic issues is as dangerous as the libertarianism of the left on sexual issues. Both are rooted in an understanding of the human person that is deeply at odds with our Catholic understanding. The bishops may like Paul Ryan, he is an easy person to like, but he has drunk deeply at the font of ideas that are hostile to the faith.

Cardinal Dolan faces a challenge as he decides what he will say to the GOP convention. It is critical that the polarization of the political world not seep into the Church anymore than it has. No one knows this

better than Cardinal Dolan who has only to look out at the plenary meeting of the USCCB to spot the divisions that have already emerged. He has only to read the comments on his own blog when he defended his decision to invite President Obama to the Al Smith dinner. Cardinal Dolan is many things and naïve is not one of them. I would delight if he were to recite the Magnificat, but that would invite a riot. One thing for sure about Mitt Romney's GOP ? they do not intend to send the rich away empty. Dolan will not be rude. I am quite sure he will not say anything particularly political ? and that if he were to address the Democratic Convention, his prayer would be similarly non-partisan. I hope he stays away from anything too dripping in patriotism because some of his listeners in Tampa believe some crazy things about God's relationship to the Republic, as I discovered when reviewing Pastor Richard Lee's book ?The Coming Revolution.? I am all for patriotism, and I love my country, but I do not love it the way Pastor Lee loves it. In the end, if I were in Cardinal Dolan's shoes, and I am not, I would be tempted to keep it simple and lead the assembled Republicans ? and Democrats if asked ? in the Lord's Prayer. There is plenty for both party's members to consider when they ask ?Thy will be done.?

Source URL (retrieved on 06/22/2018 - 6:19pm): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/dolan-gop-convention>

Links:

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/node/160616>