

## Dear Democratic Catholics

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 4, 2012 | Distinctly Catholic

Last week, I published an open letter to Republican Catholics and today I do the same for Democratic Catholics. As mentioned, it is important to recognize the relationship of noun and verb: Catholic is the noun, party affiliation the adjective. If you are a partisan first, this is not for you. I am speaking to Catholics who, for whatever reason, have an allegiance to the Democratic Party but recognize that their prior allegiance is to their Catholic faith.

Dear Democratic Catholics,

I concluded last week that the GOP's commitment to laissez-faire and libertarian economic ideas amply fulfilled Pope Pius XI's warning about the "poisoned spring" such ideas represent in his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*:

*For from this source, as from a poisoned spring, have originated and spread all the errors of individualist economic teaching. Destroying through forgetfulness or ignorance the social and moral character of economic life, it held that economic life must be considered and treated as altogether free from and independent of public authority, because in the market, i.e., in the free struggle of competitors, it would have a principle of self direction which governs it much more perfectly than would the intervention of any created intellect. But free competition, while justified and certainly useful provided it is kept within certain limits, clearly cannot direct economic life - a truth which the outcome of the application in practice of the tenets of this evil individualistic spirit has more than sufficiently demonstrated.*

This text from Pope Pius XI, writing in 1931, mirrors another text I have cited frequently, and with which I began this blog more than two years ago. It is from Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s "The Age of Jackson" published in 1946:

*American democracy has come to accept the struggle among competing groups for the control of the state as a positive virtue - indeed, as the only foundation for liberty. The business community has been ordinarily the most powerful of these groups, and liberalism in America has been ordinarily the movement on the part of the other sections of society to restrain the power of the business community.*

These two texts, from two starkly different personalities and two minds rooted in very different philosophies, nonetheless possess a common intuition, an intuition that is at the same time deeply humane and profoundly Christian, the intuition that is at the heart of the social justice tradition of Democratic Catholics: We are in this together. Just as we turn to government to assist with the challenges wrought by a natural disaster (and I have never heard of a Republican Governor asking that his storm-ravaged state NOT be declared a federal disaster area), we turn to our government to assist with the challenges wrought by our free market economy. This was the moral basis for the New Deal which did not kill free enterprise, it saved it. Medicare and Medicaid did not reject the advances in modern medicine, they made them accessible. The Affordable Care Act, aka Obamacare, is one more step towards fulfilling the social justice mandate: No person should be bankrupted by a health crisis. Obamacare began as an epithet, but I think the Democrats should embrace the term. Yes, Obama, and the

Democratic Party, does care. Obamacare does not, as the Republicans claim, put government into the examining room, it opens the door to that examining room for millions of Americans. Immigration Reform remains the outstanding political goal for those of us who wish to see every person treated as a person, no matter the vagaries of the market, or the caprice of local nativists.

It is easy to see why the Democratic Party became a natural home for Catholics. One of the distinguishing marks of Catholicism, going back to the Reformation, is that while Protestants place a large emphasis on the letters of Paul and the Hebrew Scriptures, Catholics place the four Gospels front and center in our spirituality and theology. And, the Gospels, from the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, to Matthew 25 (whatever you do for these the least of my brethren), to the parable of the Good Samaritan, all confirm the intuition that we human beings are obligated one to another, and especially to the poor. This does not necessarily require a "big government" program, but sometimes it does. And, we are not afraid to invoke the help, the subsidium, of government to make our society more humane. Those who wish to give Catholic cover to today's Republican Party must reckon with the strength and vitality and orthodoxy of this proud tradition of social justice.

The natural alliance between the Democratic Party and Catholics began to unravel in the 1970s. The reasons are many and complicated and my book [Left at the Altar](#) [1] treated those reasons in great detail. I will only mention two here that seem especially relevant to the current campaign, race and abortion.

I feel a great sense of pride when I enter my parish church, the Cathedral of St. Matthew, the Apostle. Hanging from the rafters are two galeros, one of which belonged to Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle. As Archbishop of Washington, O'Boyle not only began the integration of the Catholic schools before *Brown v. Board of Education*, he offered the invocation at the March on Washington which concluded with Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. And, when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 looked like it would be filibustered, he said it was immoral to oppose passage of that seminal law. O'Boyle and countless other bishops, priests, sisters and laity, stood with Dr. King and other civil rights leaders in their quest for justice.

Not every Catholic followed O'Boyle's lead. We tend to think of the civil rights struggle as something that happened in the South, but Dr. King encountered the same hatred and bigotry when he marched for fair housing in the heavily Catholic suburbs of Chicago. Senator Edward Kennedy was pelted with tomatoes and rocks in downtown Boston during the fight over busing. Many white working class Catholics responded just as warmly as their southern Protestant brethren to Ronald Reagan's denunciations of "welfare queens." Gov. Romney's current ad, which falsely accuses President Obama of gutting the work requirement enacted as part of welfare reform in 1996, is not directed at southern Protestants: Romney is going to win most of the South. It is directed at white working class voters in the industrial heartland, many of whom are Catholic. The campaign's polling data undoubtedly reveals that we Catholics have a lot of work to do in eradicating the sin of racism from our midst, and we should not be shy in calling out the GOP for playing on that sin.

There is one other aspect to the issue of race that should deeply concern Catholics. In several states, there has been an effort to restrict the ability of people, mostly poor, urban people, from exercising their right to vote. The bishops of the United States have rightly stood up to defend religious liberty. Their silence on these efforts to disenfranchise voters is inexcusable. Tendentious campaign ads are one thing. Denying voters their right to vote is another. Race has stalked this Republican campaign to erect hurdles to voting from the start. All the protestations about freedom we heard in Tampa ring hollow.

The issue of abortion cuts the other way. Here it is the left that has need of the leaven of Democratic Catholics. Even though I know the history, it remains a mystery to me that a party committed to the downtrodden, to those who are voiceless, to protecting the weak, could have failed to recognize that their concern should be extended to the unborn. I can understand, and sympathize with, a woman who feels an abortion is a remedy to an unwanted pregnancy. I cannot understand, and have no sympathy, with the idea that this decision is right. Here

we see again the evil consequences of replacing a substantive ethic of the good with a formal ethics of rights. The issue is, for me, and for all Catholics, first and foremost an issue of justice. This failure to protect the weak does not only run contrary to Catholic teaching, it runs counter to the entire humane impulses of the Democratic Party. And, the moral imperative to confront this failure finds ample warrant in our Scriptures. This past Sunday, we heard in the Letter of St. James that we Christians are called to special concern for the widow and the orphan. Who is more a widow than an unwed mother, abandoned by the man who got her pregnant? Who is more an orphan than the child who is unwelcomed even before her birth?

I know that others see the issue differently. I think there was in the 1970s and is today great confusion about the difference between a very personal decision and a private decision. If the unborn child is a person, the issue is personal but it is not private. I understand, too, that many people, including many Catholics, find it easier to sympathize with the circumstances of a woman facing an unplanned pregnancy, than with the moral status of a newly conceived child. I understand, too, that only through the eyes of faith is the moment of conception a natural dividing line. As Catholics, we view the unborn child as a soul, knitted in the womb by God and known before the knitting. What Chiara Lubich, the founder of Focolare, once said of children, we can apply equally to the unborn; "For me, they are not small. The soul is not small, it is equal, and God is present in the same way, both in children and adults." Those words "The soul is not small, it is equal" are a challenge, a profound moral challenge, to the party that defined itself as the party of equal rights.

You do not need the eyes of faith to see the problem with the abortion-on-demand legal regime under which our country suffers. We know that the zygote, the fetus, the baby, is human. It is not an acorn. It will not grow into an oak tree. And, once the pregnancy reaches the point that twinning is no longer possible, we know too that an individual human person is present, with genetic markers and a historical destiny that will be in significant respects self-same throughout its life and is irreducible. You do not need the eyes of faith to see these moral facts.

In studying the battle of abortion laws in the late 60s and 70s, I was struck by the fact that many opinion polls showed that a majority of Americans supported more liberal abortion laws not only in cases of rape or incest, but in cases of fetal abnormality. If you have ever spent a day at Special Olympics, you know the unique joy that is brought into the world by children with special needs. The fact that many thousands of children with Down's Syndrome are aborted every year robs the world of a love we so desperately need because it is a love that is so patently purer than we encounter with the able-minded. I understand that a family, perhaps with limited means, or with limited insurance, cannot imagine how they can raise a child with special needs. The solution must be to provide those means, not to kill the child. How impoverished are we?

Such considerations were cast aside by the Democrats. The libertarianism that the Democrats rightly condemn in the economic sphere was here embraced to justify a woman's right to abortion-on-demand. "No one can tell me what to do with my body," went the chant. "So long as I don't hurt anyone, I can do what I want." Of course, an abortion is a rather grave hurt to someone, but in the 1970s, before sonograms, it was easy to believe the propaganda that what was being done was something other than the killing of a child. And, since *Roe v. Wade*, the Democratic Party has found itself more and more beholden to interest groups that are primarily concerned with protecting this supposed right. Even when common sense restrictions have been proposed, such as a ban on late-term abortions, restrictions that are quite common in the rest of the West, the non-compromising libertarianism of the abortion-rights lobby went to work, threatening to withhold contributions from candidates or to mount a primary challenge to anyone who did not share their absolutist agenda. They cowed not only those who opposed legalized abortion, but those who were deeply ambivalent about the issue.

It has not been easy for pro-life Democrats to know what to do. In Indiana, the Right-to-Life Committee adopted a policy of never endorsing Democrats, and there are some great pro-life Democrats in the Hoosier State. Pro-life Democrats watched those who share their concerns vote Republican and, strangely, appear

satisfied with what they got for their support. Overturning the Mexico City policy, a few court appointments here or there. Certainly Mr. Romney and Mr. Ryan have not made much of their pro-life bona fides during the campaign.

Pro-life Democrats are right to point out the ways that Republican efforts to cut funding for certain government programs that assist the poor will likely cause a spike in the abortion rate. Most women who procure abortions say that their economic circumstances were determinative, and in those countries with more robust social services, especially health care services, the abortion rate is significantly lower. Pro-life Democrats rightly point to the many ways the Affordable Care Act will help reduce the abortion rate, especially the \$250 million specifically targeted to assist women facing crisis pregnancies and the tripling of the adoption tax credit. It is more than a little ironic that despite the economic downturn, the abortion rate has fallen in Massachusetts after the enactment of universal health care in that state, the signature achievement of then-Governor Romney. Now, he wishes to repeal the Affordable Care Act which would also reduce the abortion rate and there is nary a word of protest from pro-life leaders. The irony is that only the Democratic Party, with its commitment to a vigorous social welfare state, can be entrusted with the task of minimizing and eliminating the scourge of abortion.

Many Catholic politicians do what they can to actually help women facing crisis pregnancies, and their efforts are not insubstantial. Here in Maryland, where I live, our Governor Martin O'Malley worked to secure funding for St. Ann's Infant and Maternity Home, which currently serves 27 children and 39 pregnant teens in a residential program, and 127 children in its day care program. St. Ann's Home was built in 1962 and it desperately needed a new roof and HVAC system if it was to continue its good works. Under O'Malley's leadership, the State of Maryland kicked in 84% of the funding needed, more than \$2 million. In other ways, O'Malley has undertaken policies that have already lowered the infant mortality rate. I will write in the near future about some of these policies.

Such actions need to be put on the scale, and they certainly attest to the fact that the Democrats are not accurately described as the "party of death." That new roof at St. Ann's will speak well for O'Malley on Judgment Day and while Maryland contributed the lion's share of the funds, a grant from HUD helped too. Will HUD grants survive a Romney-Ryan administration?

The pro-life consequences of Democratic policies are real, but they do not earn the Democrats a pass. There is still a fundamental, underlying fact that under current law, our nation allows one group of persons to decide the ultimate fate of another group of persons. I fear, and fear greatly, that history will judge us as it has judged the liberals of the 1920s who championed eugenics. When CNN reported the story earlier this year, even Anderson Cooper acknowledged the story was "shocking" and "almost unbelievable" and the "shameful truth." The Nazis sent aides to California to learn their methodology. All of it was defended at the time by leading scientists and the U.S. Supreme Court. All of it was seen as "progress." All of it was also evil and only Pope Pius XI had the courage to say so. His encyclical, *Casti conubii*, published the year before *Quadragesimo Anno*, denounced eugenics at a time when no one else would. Pius was consistent: He denounced the social Darwinism of *laissez-faire* economics as well as the social Darwinism of the eugenicists. Sadly, neither party, in 2012, has the intellectual and moral consistency that Pius exhibited more than eighty years ago.

I do not expect pro-choice Democratic Catholics to suddenly have a change of heart and support overturning *Roe*. I do not think overturning *Roe* would accomplish very much. But, I do expect Democratic Catholics, both politicians and the rest of us, to give voice to our concern for the unborn. I do expect them not to simply cite the many ways their policies help women to keep their children, but to yield to the moral logic of those policies and recognize how out-of-kilter a pro-choice position is with everything else that is humane and noble about the Democratic Party. And I expect Democratic Catholic leaders to insist that there should be a place for pro-life voices within the Democratic Party. We thought that was the case four years ago, when Sen. Bob Casey addressed the Democratic National Convention in primetime. This year, the head of NARAL will address the

convention.

This year, too, there is a new, but related issue, that of the HHS mandate. My views on the matter are well known. It is shocking to me that the President and his staff did not find the kind of readily available policy solution to the issue. They chose to side with those who have an expressed and, in the event, understandable desire to minimize the role of the Catholic Church in the public square. If you believe that Margaret Sanger was a hero, and that Roe was correctly decided, and that you want all hospitals, no matter what their religious affiliation, to perform abortions, you are quite right to see the Catholic Church as your enemy. And, in this great free country of ours, you have every right to do so. You have every right to try and see as many of the Church's ministries considered secular in terms of the law so that you can better enforce your moral norms on those ministries. You have every right to try and whittle down the First Amendment protections afforded the Church. And we Catholics have every right to fight you.

But, shame on President Obama for siding with this secularizing agenda. I am sure he does not intend a "war on religion" and that is it wrong to accuse him of such, but he has taken the side of those who do and foolishly ignored the vital role our Catholic religious institutions play in society. Shame on him for failing to recognize that diversity is an important liberal value and that the leveling effects of his mandate is an affront to diversity. Shame on him for failing to say that if Emily's List is so concerned about what is done at hospitals, perhaps they should start some of their own instead of trying forcing Catholic hospitals to conform to the Emily's List agenda. His campaign strategy, first outlined last November in [an article by Thomas Edsall](#) [2], has taken the Democratic Party away from its historic vocation as the champion of the working class.

And, I am bound in conscience to write these words: Shame on those Democratic Catholics who have sought to give the President political cover for this decision, dismissing the concern for religious liberty as a smokescreen or a manufactured issue. It may seem so to others. It is not so for me. I have written before that the President's decision on the HHS mandate cost him my vote. I understand that other well-informed consciences will reach a different conclusion. I stand by mine.

There is much that is good, very good, in the Democratic Party. I do not for a moment regret being raised in that particular partisan bosom. The party is still worth fighting for. I will stay and struggle so that the Democratic Party rejects the secularizing agenda of a few well-heeled fundraisers, convinced among other things that no solution to the abortion issue will ever be found unless there are pro-life voices in both parties. Besides, the Republican Party is more deeply in bed with the libertarianism that is the primal threat to Catholic anthropology: The dictatorship of relativism wears many masks, but the commitment to laissez-faire economics is the greatest contemporary threat to the common good. Nonetheless, when the Democratic party platform refuses even to adopt "big tent" language on abortion, when a Democratic administration pursues an unnecessary fight with my Church, and when every other ad run by the Obama campaign makes it seem that his running mate in 2012 is Planned Parenthood, well, you can forgive me my lack of enthusiasm for the fate of the Democratic Party this year.

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