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Sr. Simone vs. Sandra Fluke

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Distinctly Catholic

The Democrats have run a pretty smooth convention. Yes, they ran into trouble over the platform?s omission of God and Jerusalem, but that story will die quickly because it was corrected. But, they made one scheduling mistake last night. Sr. Simone Campbell?s talk came before the 10 o?clock prime hour, and Sandra Fluke?s was moved to come within the 10 o?clock hour. It was heartwarming to witness the great reception Sr. Simone received. Fluke?s speech seemed to fall flat, both in the hall and across the airwaves. Why?

Sr. Simone spoke about helping the poor. She not only reiterated the bishops? ? and her own ? opposition to the Ryan budget, she held up the work of women religious who actually work with the poor. There is a unique moral authority that such work bestows. When she said ?I am my sister?s keeper,? she recalled what Democrats most liked about Barack Obama when he first entered the national consciousness in 2004: He, too, invoked that biblical image in support of a politics and a society built more on cooperation and less on competition. In short, Sr. Simone seemed more in touch with the basic image of the Democratic Party as the party that cares for other people because she did not speak about herself, she spoke about the needs of others. It was a homerun.

Ms. Fluke was powerful when she said that women were no longer content to be talked about. They can speak for themselves. This part of her speech spoke to the experience of countless women who have been at meetings and not been acknowledged, to women who have been made to feel invisible, to women who have strong opinions but are never asked what those opinions are.

Of course, that experience does not mean that Fluke?s, or anyone else?s, opinions are free from moral evaluation. We still must evaluate political assertions in terms of the common good and human dignity. There are no privileged hermeneutics. And, here, Fluke failed, as did the countless speakers on Tuesday night who spoke about the supposed right to an abortion or to contraception coverage. Unlike Sr. Simone, Fluke did not speak about the needs of others, she spoke about herself. Indeed, all these pro-choice speakers discussed a woman?s right to do what they want with their own body exactly the way Republicans talk about their right to do what they want with their own income. "It's mine, dammit," both say. Fluke?s speech was the speech of a libertarian. Sr. Simone?s was the speech of a communitarian.

I have commented on this before. It was curious, indeed, when pro-choice Democrats denounced the Virginia law mandating ultrasounds for women before an abortion, but championed the HHS mandate and the individual mandate before the Supreme Court. Republicans denounced the latter two mandates but loved the Virginia mandate. Only the Catholic Church is consistent here: Mandates are appropriate when they fulfill the common good, there is a moral criterion that is inescapable even if it eludes the libertarians who think no one can tell them anything.

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