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Redistribution & The Parallel Universe at Fox

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 20, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

It was clear that the strategists in Mitt Romney?s campaign thought that they had something damaging on President Obama when they released a copy of a tape, made fourteen years ago, in which Barack Obama, then a state senator, told an audience that he was in favor of some level of redistribution, at least enough to ?give everybody a shot.? The Romney campaign released this video in response to the emergence of Romney?s now infamous ?47%? comments. Alas for Romney, not all ?secret? tapes are created equal.

I do not need to add anything to the large body of commentary about why Romney?s comments were wrong about the facts, and morally offensive to boot. The fact that you have prominent Republicans distancing themselves from Mr. Romney?s comments tells you all you need to know about their political consequences. But, I am more interested in why the Romney campaign thought the Obama tape about ?redistribution? would serve as an effective counter. After all, government has always been involved in some kind of redistribution of wealth. That is what taxes do, take from some and give to projects or programs that will benefit others.

The idea is pretty simple. I do not have any children to send to college ? Bernie, Clementine and Ambrose are not suited for university life. But I have an interest in making college affordable for more and more people because a more educated citizenry will be better citizens, more productive workers, happier human beings, etc. Education does not just improve the individual student. It improves all of society, not least because that now-educated student will benefit the rest of us in ways that would not have been possible without an education. College loans make that possible. There are some people, of course, who are able to go to college without student loans, say, if their Dad gave them stock to live off of, and bought them a home to live in during grad school. Hmmm. Anyone come to mind Mr. Romney?

Other instances of redistribution are similarly evidence of advancing the public good. Among those no-good moochers who pay no federal income tax are the men and women serving in Afghanistan. Combat pay is not subject to federal income tax, and the pay itself comes from the federal Treasury. Social Security checks are paid for by current workers, redistributing wealth across generations. Perhaps, Mr. Romney is unfamiliar with that program because his investment income is not subject to Social Security tax. And for several decades now, starting with Richard Nixon, the Earned Income Tax Credit has been a principal tool for fighting poverty, helping the working poor keep more of their income so that they can, as Mr. Romney suggested, take personal responsibility for themselves and their families. The EITC really is the closest thing to pure redistribution in the tax code: Would Mr. Romney repeal it?

So, why did the Romney campaign thing this tape of then-state senator Obama would make a splash? Sadly, in America today, some people live in a parallel universe in which their sole source of ?fair and balanced? information is Fox News. And, in that parallel universe, ?redistribution? is one of those words that is spit out of the mouths of conservative commentators as if it had only four letters. ?Entitlement? is another, even though, as Catholics we do believe that people are entitled to health care and food and shelter by reason of their being human beings. In this parallel universe that is Fox News, those who receive government benefits really are a bunch of moochers, although, when you look at the data, 8 of the 10 states with the highest percentage of people

who pay no federal taxes are GOP bastions. In this parallel universe, ?redistribution? is a sign of ?socialism? or, if the guest being interviewed is a libertarian, evidence of a ?collectivist? mentality. In this parallel universe, government is always intrusive and bad and the free market is always just and fair. In the parallel universe at Fox, the growing income inequality in America is never a problem worth discussing, and any attempt to ameliorate the effects of that growing inequality is evidence of socialism. Most importantly, in the parallel universe at Fox, President Obama epitomizes and has governed in accordance with this nefarious redistributionist, collectivist, socialistic, agenda. And, now they had the tape to prove it!

We Catholics live in something of a parallel universe, too. Our view of the human person and our ethics are rooted in the self-revelation of Jesus Christ. As far as the record shows, He did not urge His followers to ?success? in materialistic terms, He had some sharp things to say regarding the love of money, and He could scarcely have been more clear about our obligations to the poor. Countless statements by many popes, trying to apply the Gospel to the industrial and post-industrial age, have been similarly clear about the social and political obligations we have to address the consequences of income inequality. I linked a few weeks ago to an article at Vox Nova [1] that catalogued some of those papal warnings. We are called to charity at a personal level, of course. But, we are also called to make our society more just. In the past thirty years, the market has functioned to greatly redistribute wealth from the lower classes to the super-rich. Only government can serve as a counter-weight. This is Catholic social teaching 101.

Most voters are not heirs to our rich tradition of Catholic social teaching. But, most voters have been watching the past four years. They know that if Mr. Obama?s principal aim has been redistribution, he has done a very bad job at it. They know the stock market is up even as wages are flat. They know that health care reform will not impoverish the insurance companies. They know that saving Detroit was a good thing for the government to do at a time when no one but the government could do it. They know that Obama is so far from being a socialist, just as the corporate bigwigs who lobby for tax breaks are unclean when it comes to complaining about government largesse. The real irony in this discussion about redistribution is that we need more of it, not less, if we are to avoid the truly dangerous social consequences that flow from sustained income inequality. Mr. Romney doesn?t get it. One half expects him to next urge the 47% to eat cake. Mr. Obama gets it, but our political culture and the effects of the recession ? a recession brought on by the greed of the plutocrats ? keep him from the kind of real reforms that might address the growing income inequality that threatens the nation?s future.

The question for Catholics ? and for our bishops, some of whom frighteningly seem all too comfortable with the parallel universe at Fox ? is whether we will help begin the conversation the nation needs: A society in which the very, very wealthy view the rest of us with disdain, is a society in grave danger and no one is more endangered than the very, very wealthy. We need structural changes in the economy and, failing that, more aggressive efforts at income redistribution. We need a society in which people, as people, really are entitled to food and shelter and health care. That vision of society may scare Mr. Romney and his well-heeled donors. It should scare them less than a society so angry that it cries to heaven for justice having found none here on earth.

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[1] http://vox-nova.com/2012/08/21/inequality-and-catholic-social-teaching/