

+Dolan & +DiMarzio on Poverty

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 28, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

It is no surprise to any regular readers that I am a big fan of New York's Cardinal-Archbishop Timothy Dolan. Some of those reasons are personal: Dolan, like myself, studied under Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, who was the most cultured man I have known, literate in the extreme (and cultural literacy is one area where being extreme is a good thing!), and a very fine priest. Ellis imparted to all his students, the future-cardinal included, a sympathy with the human condition that comes from the study of history, and a certain modesty about our own roles. Msgr. was also attuned to the workings of the Spirit in history and often quoted the words from the Gospel about the Spirit being like the wind, we see the leaves of the trees rustle, but we know not whence the wind came nor whither it goes.

There are less personal reasons for my admiration. I like it when we have religious leaders who smile rather than frown, who encourage rather than wag fingers, and who laugh and who make others laugh. Just as importantly, Dolan is smart and smart saves a person from much foolishness. Finally, Dolan is not afraid to be seen as a human being, he connects with people, he is not so full of himself that he makes no room for others. We all know many politicians and many prelates of whom this cannot be said.

All these characteristics that I like come together in his most recent post at his blog, where a [statement from the cardinal and Bishop DiMarzio of Brooklyn is posted](#). [1] They begin by recalling the feast day of St. Vincent de Paul, who through his own life and through the charities he has inspired, has done so much for the poor. And not just in the way of material assistance, important though that is. The St. Vincent de Paul societies provide a space in which Catholics can be with the poor, not just serve them. The poor have much to teach us. It is among them that we find the Lord Jesus every time.

The letter from the two bishops looks at the fact of income inequality within their own areas. Dolan notes that in one East Manhattan neighborhood, the average household income is \$101,000 while across the river in the South Bronx, it is only \$19,800 in one neighborhood. He cites the increasing number of people in New York who live in poverty. This statement of the sad facts does not lead Dolan and DiMarzio to throw up their hands, but to challenge the rest of us to do better.

Dolan's letter also challenges the urban myth that if the government simply shut down all its various programs to help the poor, private charities could do the rest. "Even with the generosity of the American people, and the work of groups like the Saint Vincent de Paul Society and so many others, much more needs to be done, and not just by private charity. The government must continue to play its part as well." When private charities in the nineteenth century turned to the needs of the poor, the times were simpler. I recall meeting with a religious sister who ran a hospital. She had huge books of Medicaid regulations on the bookshelf behind her. I inquired. "I became a nun because I wanted to serve the Lord by helping the poor," she said. "Today that means knowing Medicaid regulations." And so it does.

The letter goes on to commend the valiant work of Catholic Charities, it asserts that the Church always has and always must have a preferential option for the poor. He quotes his confrere, Archbishop Charles Chaput, who recently told NCR's own John Allen: "Jesus tells us very clearly that if we don't help the poor, we are going to

go to hell." The letter from Dolan and DiMarzio also points out that "Too much rhetoric in the country portrays poor people in a very negative way." We are called to love the poor, and that requires more than putting an extra dollar in the poor box, important though that is. The poor are to be respected as fellow human beings and loved as those closest to the Lord Jesus.

But, it is the final lines of Dolan's appeal that really struck home to me and which distinguishes this letter from some of the statements we have seen from other bishops recently. "There is too much finger pointing and not enough joining hands. Solidarity is critical to ensure the dignity of all," the letter concludes. Instead of being divisive, the appeal is to join hands. And care for the poor is linked explicitly with human dignity. Contrast this with efforts by some prelates to divide the electorate, as if it was not already divided enough! Those who embrace the human dignity of the unborn need to be encouraged to embrace the human dignity of the poor ñ not to have a libertarian economic agenda given a faux-baptism. Conversely, by calling attention of Catholics to the human dignity of the poor, and by using that phrase, "human dignity," the letter provides an echo for those on the left who wish to recognize the human dignity of the poor but do not extend their concern to the unborn.

There is in the Dolan-DiMarzio letter not a whiff of the moral relativism found in the statements of those who suggest budgetary matters are left to "prudential judgment" and, consequently, incapable of moral judgment or, better to say, any moral analysis is as good as any other. Dolan does not baptize the income inequality he cites, he holds it up as a challenge to the rest of us, a moral challenge not just an economic one. Ours is a rich nation. If we were forced to go to war, there is no question we would all be willing to pay for it. But, why are so many so unwilling to pay for those programs that assist the poor? The long-term debt problems the nation faces are real, but they are no excuse for gutting the programs Cardinal Dolan and Bishop DiMarzio here describe as necessary.

I defy anyone to discern a partisan agenda or talking point here. This, too, is important. One of my worries is that when the bishops of the U.S. appear as partisans, they will alienate some Catholics unnecessarily. As I mentioned the other day, this is exactly what happened with the rise of the Moral Majority in the 1980s ñ it gave way in the 1990s to the rise of the "nones," those who, when asked their religious affiliation reply "none." The Church must engage the political realm to be sure, but the manner of the engagement matters greatly to the Church. We must try not to be seen as partisan because the people in the pews know that politics is an often ugly business and they rightly want the Church to engage without getting tarred by the association. The Rev. Billy Graham kept his distance from politics after getting singed by his friendship with Nixon. Billy Graham learned a lesson Falwell ignored. The question for the U.S. bishops is: Will you speak, as I believe Cardinal Dolan and Bishop DiMarzio have done here, in a way that shows you know that partisanship and the pulpit only mix in ways that do harm to the Church? Will the Catholic Church follow its own traditions of principled engagement on issues or will it follow the Falwell model of winking and nodding at partisanship? I hope most bishops will pursue the kind of language that Dolan and DiMarzio display here, calling our people to solidarity, not division, and relying simply on the teachings of the Church and the example of the saints.

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[1] <http://blog.archny.org/index.php/feast-of-st-vincent-depaul/>