NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

To Tell the Truth

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 5, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Some of you may be old enough to remember the game show ?To Tell the Truth.? It featured three contestants all claiming to be the same person. The celebrity panelists asked questions to try and determine which of the contestants was who he or she claimed to be. Each show ended with the host saying: ?Will the real ?insert name- please stand up??

The election will occur one month from tomorrow. And voters can be forgiven for wishing to mimic the told television show and ask: Will the real - insert Mitt Romney or Barack Obama- please stand up?

There was Romney on the stage Wednesday night, asserting that he has no intention of giving the wealthy a huge tax break, no intention of repealing Dodd-Frank, just the bad bits, no intention of scuttling all of Obamacare, just the onerous parts. Rather than face scrutiny about these novel claims, Mr. Romney did an interview with Sean Hannity [1]last night, where he was not pressed to explain anything. But, there was a very interesting moment in the interview in which Romney finally admitted that his videotaped comments about the 47% of Americans who do not pay taxes and see themselves as victims and will never take responsibility for their lives, those comments, heretofore excused as ?inelegant? are now ?just completely wrong,? Romney confessed.

Of course, those comments were made in front of an audience that consisted mostly of people a lot like Romney. The always stiff candidate seemed perfectly at ease surrounded by fellow fat cats. He may not have been speaking from his heart when he said those dismissive things, but he was speaking from his ideology. And, as he told Hannity, his whole life if filled with events and episodes that prove he cares about more than his own. I actually believe that last line. I suspect Romney is a very decent man and would love him as a neighbor, even though I could never afford his neighborhood.

But, Nixon loved his dog and that did not make him any less of a crook. Let us stipulate that Romney is a decent guy, that he really does not wish to sock it to the middle class or the poor. Let us stipulate that he is really concerned about all people, that he doesn?t really consider those who pay no federal income taxes moochers, and that he is sincere in his ambition to protect Medicare for future generations. Why, then, did he let himself get turned into a pretzel of conservative contradictions these past two years while he was running for president? Why did he refuse to say during one of the GOP debates that yes he would vote for a deficit reduction plan that included one dollar in new tax revenue for every ten dollars in spending cuts? And why did he choose as a running mate the single person most identified with an assault on Medicare that will change the nature of the

social contract irrevocably? Will the real Mitt Romney please stand up?

Mr. Obama has spent the last few years portraying himself as fighting for the middle class, but he sure did not have much fight in him the other night, not for the middle class, not even for himself! As in the case of Mr. Romney, I am willing to stipulate that the president sincerely wants to help the middle class, that he correctly recognizes that Romney?s and Ryan?s proposals for Medicare are truly transformational and not in a good way, and that deficit reduction must be balanced. But, why then was there no fight? Mr. Obama, as I suggested yesterday, is surrounded by people for whom these issues are all abstract. The president has confessed that he is himself a wonk. His speeches are great, to be sure, but can he give an account of his beliefs about government without a speech text?

The Obama campaign is also a bit constricted in their ability to challenge Mr. Romney?s latest re-make of himself because they have taken liberties with the truth in their own advertisements. The ad that claims Romney is going to raise taxes on the middle class simply does not ring true. More likely, Romney will do what GOP deficit hawks who have attained the White House previously have done: Leave the deficit and the debt for future presidents to worry about. Maybe Romney will negotiate a grand bargain. Maybe Obama will. But, if middle class tax increases are a part of the agenda for either man, I will print out and eat this blog post.

Watching the debate and the post-debate spin and the Romney interview last night and reading the accounts of all this today, I find myself asking the question Pilate asked ? what is truth? ? and thinking that our political system has turned into a giant retro-remake of ?To Tell the Truth.? Except, at the end of each show, someone was actually telling the truth. In our politics today, that is a bridge too far.

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[1] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/04/mitt-romney-47-percent_n_1941423.html?icid=maing-grid10%7Chtmlws-main-bb%7Cdl1%7Csec1_lnk2%26pLid%3D215839