

On All of Our Shoulders

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 10, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

A diverse group of theologians and academics have penned a statement in advance of tomorrow night's vice presidential debate that squarely, coherently, and, I think, decisively makes the case that Congressman Paul Ryan's Ayn Rand, libertarian sensibilities, and the policies that flow from them, are incompatible with Catholic social teaching. You can find the full statement "On All of Our Shoulders" by clicking [here](#) [1].

The title of the statement "On All of Our Shoulders" is an obvious reference to Ms. Rand's famous book "Atlas Shrugged." Atlas, you will recall, carried the world on his shoulders and the Catholic theologians who drafted this statement wish to suggest that all of us, as a group, are responsible for carrying the world on our shoulders. They are, in short, giving life and breath to the magnificent opening words of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

The statement speaks for itself, rich in quotations from recent papal encyclicals, especially Pope Benedict's magnificent *Caritas in Veritate*. To anyone who buys into the line that Pope Benedict's papacy has been primarily concerned to rollback the reforms of Vatican II, that encyclical stands as only the most obvious piece of evidence to rebut the charge. The statement has several quotes from that encyclical, including this longish one which the signatories correctly note sounds as if it was designed specifically to challenge the Ryan budget:

From the social point of view, systems of protection and welfare are finding it hard and could find it even harder in the future to pursue their goals of true social justice in today's profoundly changed environment. [T]he market has prompted new forms of competition between States as they seek to attract foreign businesses. These processes have led to a downsizing of social security systems as the price to be paid for seeking greater competitive advantage in the global market, with consequent grave danger for the rights of workers, for fundamental human rights and for the solidarity associated with the traditional forms of the social State. Systems of social security can lose the capacity to carry out their task, both in emerging countries and in those that were among the earliest to develop, as well as in poor countries. Here budgetary policies, with cuts in social spending often made under pressure from international financial institutions, can leave citizens powerless in the face of old and new risks.

Here, it seems plain enough, Benedict is squarely confronting the market-crazed world in which we live and which Rand and her libertarian allies have been at pains to create.

The statement also calls out those Catholic writers I am reluctant to use the word "thinker" in this context who have repeatedly cited a solitary paragraph from Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, in which he warned against the excesses of the social assistance state, as if that one paragraph up-ended decades of Catholic social teaching. It did not. It noted, rightly, that there can be excesses, as there can in any human endeavor. But Pope John Paul II did not condemn the social assistance state, he warned against its excesses. Certainly, in the years since that encyclical was published in 1991, we have seen interesting ways that the social

assistance state has changed here in the U.S., most obviously with President George W. Bush's creation of the Faith-Based Office at the White House, an Office that President Obama has kept and strengthened. That Office has been at the center of efforts to involve civil society in the implementation of social programs, including the Church's ministries, providing them funding and also guaranteeing their religious autonomy and institutional integrity.

It should be remembered that certain conservative thinkers such as Marvin Olasky, who played a part in generating the ideas and discussions that led to the creation of the Faith-Based Office, ended up criticizing President Bush's effort because it did not rollback government involvement and funding as they had desired. Olasky and some libertarians were primarily interested in scuttling the social assistance state, not creating the kind of governmental and social cooperation that had previously been hampered by erroneous notions of a too-strict separationism regarding Church and State. And, among the reasons that Bush did not follow Olasky's libertarian impulses is because other thinkers steeped in Catholic ideas about subsidiarity and the related Calvinist idea of "sphere sovereignty" won the debate within the Bush White House, arguing that the object of the Faith-Based Office was not to rollback the government's responsibility for the common good, but to actually fulfill that responsibility in a manner that was both more effective and better for society by engaging intermediate social actors like churches in the effort to achieve the common good.

I have said before that I can understand why a Catholic would think that the issue of abortion is so important, they must hold their nose about the GOP's economic policies when they vote for a pro-life Republican candidate. I can also understand why a Catholic can conclude that Roe is not going anywhere no matter who wins the election, and so they will hold their nose about the Democrats' commitment to Roe even while voting for that party because of its positions on other issues. But, what I cannot understand, and what does real harm to the Church, is when Democratic Catholics make light of the issue of abortion, or try to misrepresent the Church's clear teaching on life issues. Nor can I abide those Republican Catholics who have been attempting to provide Catholic cover for the Ryan budget. The statement quotes the USCCB's "Faithful Citizenship" on precisely this point: "Our participation should transform the party to which we belong."

I will note one last thing about this statement: the signatories. Any effort to dismiss this statement as the work of quasi-heretical leftist theologians, doubtlessly working in cahoots with the Obama campaign, is belied by the diversity of the list of signers. Charles Camosy of Fordham is not a leftist theologian by any stretch of the imagination. Dana Dillon of Providence College is not a flaming liberal, in fact, she is not a liberal, flaming or otherwise. I could go on. There are some left-of-center theologians on the list, and some right-of-center theologians on the list. But, what matters is that the ideas they are defending are not left-of-center or right-of-center, they are Catholic ideas. Ms. Rand, and her acolyte Mr. Ryan, have met their match in this wonderful statement.

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