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Professor George's Challenge

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 26, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Over at America magazine [1], theologian Vince Miller continues the discussion of Congressman Paul Ryan?s budget. Miller was one of the signatories of the document ?On All of Our Shoulders [2]? that challenged Mr. Ryan?s budget, and the Ayn Rand-inspired, libertarian philosophy that he has many times claimed serves as the source for his ideas and values. Professor Robert George came to Ryan?s defense, charging the authors of ?On All of Our Shoulders? with partisanship, but Miller demonstrates, convincingly, that it is George himself who is guilty of the charge of partisanship, not the authors of ?On All of Our Shoulders.?

Miller actually does more than continue the discussion. He elevates it. Miller goes deeper than a competing debate about the different emphases in Catholic social teaching. He touches on a profound theological idea which, as Miller openly acknowledges, is a challenge to both parties: As Catholics, we believe that the human person is created in the image and likeness of God and, by means of the salvific Paschal Mystery, we are called to communion with the Trinity. This yields a different theological anthropology from that animating the devotees of Ms. Rand, be they the libertarians on the left who believe no one and no law can ?tell a woman what she can do with her body? as well as those libertarians on the right who believe that no one and no law can ?tell us what to do with our income.?

The idea that the human person is created in the image and likeness of God and is called to communion with the divine life and love of the Trinity has long since been emptied of its profound counter-cultural content by Professor George and his phone buddy, George Weigel, in their rush to baptize the American way. They are accommodationists of the worst sort. They start with the world ? and they like what they see! ? and seek to find some theological justification for their Republican views, usually citing, ad nauseum, one paragraph from Centesimus Annus to justify their horror at the modern social welfare state. Ross Douthat and I had a literary kerfuffle when I charged that his new book, while trying to differentiate himself from the Catholic neo-cons, nonetheless failed to grasp this deeper issue of theological anthropology in criticizing the neo-con views. Douthat, too, missed the forest for the trees. And, sad to say, some of my fellow left-of-center Catholics make a similar omission in trying to articulate what is wrong with philosophic liberalism.

So, let me be clear: The principal theological fruit of the Second Vatican Council was not collegiality, it was not Mass in the vernacular, it was not the embrace of modern ideas about religious freedom (which embrace is more complicated than commonly thought), it was not some understanding, oftentimes errant, of the Church as the People of God, not even (although it is a close second) the profoundly renewed understanding of the Church?s relationship with the ?stock of Abraham,? the Jewish people and their faith. No, the principal theological fruit of Vatican II was the recovery of a theology of Communion. Everything about Vatican II, in both the spirit and the text of the Council, points to this central reality about the Church?s understanding of herself. And that theological reality can be simply stated: Everything, absolutely everything, from our theology to our politics, from our morality to our economics, from our mundane, daily interactions to high culture, everything must be seen in the light of this call to communion with the divine life and love of the Trinity. ?For either the character of Christian revelation is seen and grasped in its entirety as the glorification of absolute love by itself, or it is not perceived at all.? These words of Hans Urs von Balthasar?s are the definitive Catholic answer to Ms. Rand.

Miller, in his column, discerns what George and Weigel miss, and you can see this most obviously in his citation to the work of Professor David Schindler, who edits the English language version of the theological journal Communio. Full disclosure: Schindler?s book ?Heart of the World, Center of the Church,? changed my life and while I do not pretend to grasp some of the theological difficulties he so effortlessly conquers, I think I have the essence of Schindler in hand, specifically the true radicalness of the vocation to love which is ours as followers of the Crucified who yet Lives. Schindler?s critique of the Americanists like Weigel and George is breathtaking but, of course, it is not the critique of George and Weigel offered by the Catholic left. I should note also that since Vatican II, certain Thomistic scholars have also embraced some of the radicalness of Communio theology, breathing new life into Thomism or, better to say, recovering the newness of Thomas, new because of Thomas? deeply evangelizing spirit and their recognition that love is the only thing that is ever really new, even while they take issue with certain ideas about the relationship between grace and nature found among some Communio theologians. For me, the great contribution of Communio theology was summed up by one of the young theologians in the Catholic Conversation Project. ?I think Communio theology can cure acne.?

But, back to ?On All of Our Shoulders.? Not all the signatories of that document could properly be termed Communio theologians, although many are. Certainly, the critique they offered is deeper than the critique of the Ryan budget offered by, say, Rep. Nancy Pelosi. I wish the document had gone further than defending the idea that man is social by nature and criticizing the hyper-individualism of our contemporary culture, and included a little of the flavor of Dorothy Day's rejectionism. Nonetheless, they were right in what they said. And, as Miller writes, they are correct to say ?No? when any Catholic attempts to baptize Ryan?s ideas about the social order, especially when those attempting to baptize those ideas so self-consciously present themselves as leading Catholic intellectuals, as Professor George and Mr. Weigel do.

Miller provides, line and verse, evidence of Ryan?s self-proclaimed devotion to Rand. I need not repeat that here. But, there is other evidence of the danger posed by the libertarian sensibilities of today?s GOP. We can all recall the moment during a GOP primary debate when a question was asked about the prospect of an uninsured person, getting to the hospital, but, lacking insurance, being left to die. The crowd cheered. It was chilling. Even Mr. Romney seems to have grasped that while he may like the Ryan budget, and hopes to enact it if elected, he certainly has not made it a centerpiece of his campaign. Americans may not grasp ? they may not even know ? about Communio theology. But, they know in their hearts that we are not called to be heartless and the evidence is there that Mr. Ryan?s budget is heartless and, more importantly, his views about the role of government in modern society are heartless.

Professor George has been quiet of late. I hope he has been reading Schindler! But, Mr. Ryan is still campaigning for high office. I do not expect politicians to be theologians, but I do expect, and applaud, theologians who challenge politicians. I applaud the theologians who wrote and signed ?On All of Our

Shoulders.? And, I applaud Miller for keeping the heat on Ryan?s apologists. There many reasons to support the candidacy of Mr. Romney and Mr. Ryan, as Miller acknowledges. But, their libertarian views of the social order cannot be baptized and those who seek to do so are not putting their Catholic faith first.

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