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Cath Dems Seek To Persuade Undecideds

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 30, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

The group Catholic Democrats has published an e-book, ?America Undecided [1],? in the final weeks of the election which, as the title indicates, is aimed at those sitting on the fence in the presidential election and making the case as to why those fence sitters should come down on the side of re-electing President Obama. Fill Disclosure: I know and admire two of the authors of the book, Doug Kmiec and Patrick Whelan, although I do not know the third, Edward Gaffney.

This is not a book I would have written, but it is a book that probably needed to be written. For months, we have heard tendentious accounts of both Catholic social teaching and of President Obama?s record, and this book serves to level the playing field. As you would imagine from a book published by Catholic Democrats, it does not adopt a critical stance towards the Democratic Party or President Obama, and I do wish it had been more willing to challenge both the president and his party. Neither party displays the consistency one discerns in Catholic social teaching. It is part of our job to serve as leaven among those on our side of the aisles, not just those sitting on the other side of the aisle.

That said, this book is not just partisan hackery by any means. It is far more accepting of the HHS mandate than I am, but it makes a better case for the mandate than, say, Sandra Fluke has done. It rightly notes that the Affordable Care Act was a singular achievement of President Obama?s and makes the case for the ACA that Democrats should have been making in the 2010 midterms, but didn?t, allowing that law to be defined largely by Republicans who opposed it.

I disagree thoroughly with the section of the book in which, after detailing a variety of possible legal outcomes from the challenges to the HHS mandate, they write:

As some point in this long list of possibilities, it may occur to Catholics who cherish the tradition of Catholic Social Thought to explain why it is that an employer who provides access to a benefit, and does not mandate the use of the benefit or condone it in any fashion, transgresses his or her conscience in conforming to a legal mandate binding all other employers? Much as we might wish there were a loophole freeing us from the general obligation to pay through the tax system for various acts of the state resulting in grave violations of the dignity of the human person?such as war, torture, and the death penalty?are aware of no case supporting the claim that the plaintiffs are pressing in this litigation.

This section would have benefited from a fuller treatment of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) and asked why RFRA was needed in the first place? After all, while the government may have the right and duty to set national policies, it should also be asked to consider the effects those policies will have on the religious rights of others. The authors here may not be concerned that a Catholic college teaches one thing in its classrooms and then funds something else with its benefit programs, but many of us do worry about the signal that sends and the subtle way it undercuts our religious witness to things we hold to be true. I think the authors are unintentionally closer to the mark when the twice refer to ?Secretary Debelius? on page 103, undoubtedly a typo, but a delicious one. Madame Secretary Sebelius has shown herself somewhat intellectually debilitated throughout this entire HHS mandate controversy.

On the other hand, the authors do us all a service by recalling the various efforts to smear President Obama as a non-Christian and a Muslim. Sometimes subtle and sometimes crass, the effort to portray Obama as ?other? has been a near-constant of the president?s political life, and it does dishonor to those who traffic in such crassness. Pandering to racial animus has a long history in American politics, but it is no less ugly for being so long standing. Sen. John McCain had the courage to stand up to it in 2008, but sadly, no one in the GOP today has been willing to do so again. On a different topic, I am equally critical of the Ryan budget as the authors, and they do a good job summing up key themes of Catholic social teaching on economics, but I wish these passages were a little more stiff-necked Catholic in tone.

So, this is no bumper sticker. It treats the issues from a distinct and highly partisan point of view. Some people will agree with every word, others with none, me with some but not others. But, if its goal is to persuade undecided voters, it is too long and too late for that task.

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