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USCCB In Disarray

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 14, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

If there was any doubt that the USCCB is in some disarray, yesterday confirmed the diagnosis. In the afternoon, the bishops unanimously agreed that it was opportune to proceed with the cause of Dorothy Day for canonization. In the morning, they rejected a statement on poverty. Hmmmm.

It should not be that difficult for a body of bishops to fashion a statement on poverty. It is one of the subjects most frequently addressed by the Master in the Gospels. Indeed, He announced His ministry by citing the powerful words of the prophet Isaiah: ?The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.? The Master said more in one parable about poverty than the rejected bishops? document said in fifteen pages. The bishops were right to reject the statement but it would be wrong to ignore what that statement and its rejection say about why the conference seems so incapable of addressing an urgent national issue, close to the heart of Jesus, central to the ministry of the Church. The Lord hears the cry of the poor. His bishops need to remove their filters if they are to hear that cry and respond to it.

Having damned the statement, I wish now to praise it. I discern something at work in its paragraphs that is important, even urgent, and it is something that we ?social justice Catholics? too often overlook: The problem of poverty has an intensely human dimension and, as Christians, we are called to understand that human dimension in the light of Him who is Incarnate, that we on the left sometimes reduce religion to ethics too. To be clear. We social justice Catholics love the Lord, and we love His Church, and our commitment to the poor flows from those twin loves. This commitment to the poor, to the Master, to the Church, is something our more conservative brothers and sisters tend to minimize when they suggest we are insufficiently ardent on life issues or wrong to raise questions about magisterial teachings some do not understand or understand and disagree with. Frankly, some of us are tired of being called bad Catholics because we voted for Obama (and I didn?t even vote for Obama! But he is not the anti-Christ). We volunteer at our parishes, and we contribute to CRS, and we defend CCHD, all because we believe that if the Lord hears the cry of the poor, so should we.

But ? always the but ? there is a kind of consequentialism that can seep into any commitment and it can be found among social justice Catholics too. I suspect it is part of human nature. What do I mean by consequentialism? I will give an example. Last week, I attended a conference on Pope Benedict?s teachings on the environment. (My colleague Brian Roewe will have an article on the event in NCR soon.) One of the best presentations came from Professor David Cloutier of Mt. St. Mary?s who discussed the ways our culture?s valuation of luxury was, in fact, destroying the planet, and that as Christians we had to address this. Professor Cloutier is one of my favorite young theologians, and his paper was really great. When we were discussing it afterwards, I mentioned that I agreed entirely that we Christians need to confront our culture?s love of luxury because of its environmental consequences but that we also needed to confront it, period.

I think the draft statement on poverty wanted to get at that period, it wanted to reach to the real human dimensions of poverty and the anthropological challenge poverty poses to we relatively affluent, pampered middle class Americans. It wanted to remind us Catholics in the U.S. that there is a deeper reality here, as when it stated, ?Tragic as material poverty is, more devastating still is the condition of despair and spiritual emptiness

it frequently engenders.? True. But, this same sentence also shows what was wrong with the statement. First, in my humble experience, if you want to find spiritual emptiness, go hang out with the rich, not the poor. It is at the country clubs, not the homeless shelter, that one finds actual human devastation. There is no moral danger in being a victim of our rapacious economy, but there is great danger in being a perpetrator of economic rape, and also danger in being a bystander. Second, that sentence, which points to something important, is too theological, it evidences none of the wonder that comes from working with, serving, empathizing with, and loving the poor. The bishops may want to canonize Dorothy Day, but their statement had none of her pointed criticism of the ambient culture. When the document spoke of ?a sense of powerlessness among our people,? they did not point out that that ?sense? was accurate, that ?our people? are powerless before the economic forces ranged against them in their pursuit of human dignity and a decent livelihood.

The document stated: ?Yet Catholic teaching ? and this point is deeply rooted in the Gospel itself ? insists that economic structures and systems are at the service of the human person, and not the other way round.? This, too, is true and critical and it needs to be shouted from the rooftops. But, the quote evidences two big problems that afflict the entire text. First, instead of referencing the Scriptures, might we not quote them? It was not until line 181 that St. Paul shows up in the text. Again, there are ample stories of Jesus caring for the poor that would sooner welcome the reader into a profound reflection on poverty than the verbiage from papal documents that are quoted abundantly. Second problem, one the great features of those papal documents is that they actually look up and look around. Our teaching may ?insist? that the economy is made for man and not man for the economy, but try selling that on Wall Street. Hell, try selling that in Washington. Here was a moment for some prophetic challenge to the dominant culture, but none emerged.

A central part of the defeated text rightly notes the importance of moral virtue ? in addressing poverty and indeed in addressing any human situation characterized by sinfulness. But is moral virtue enough? A CEO might wish to follow Church teaching, pay a living wage to her workers, recognize their collective bargaining rights, ensure decent working conditions. But, if those humane actions cause the stock price of her company to decline, she will be fired, the company will move to a ?right-to-work? state or aboard, and it will be back to business as usual. All, repeat all, the incentives of our hyper-financialized economy focus on the bottom line of profit, not the bottom line of human dignity. The economy in which we live not only invites, it often requires, actions that are antithetical to the Gospel. Multinational corporations flee a living wage like the plague and they pay no never mind to the social devastation of factory closings. This has been going on for years, and yet some of the bishops turn to the Acton Institute for advice. Lord help us.

One of the stronger sections in the text dealt with the important role in society played by intermediate social actors such as the Church and unions and, most importantly, the family. Another powerful section looked at the ways economic forces place unbearable pressures on families, requiring two incomes so that parents have less time with their children and each other. There was some really good stuff in this text. But, in the end, it failed to look up and look around. It failed to capture any of the power of Dorothy Day?s writings on poverty and it also failed to capture any of the truly cultural soul-searching questions the bishops raised in their seminal, controversial pastoral letter on the economy ?Economic Justice for All.? Certainly, nothing in the text reminded us that Jesus threw the money changers out of the Temple. In the debate at the USCCB meeting no one mentioned this, but I thought a principal failure of the document was that it minimized the important role of government in serving as a check on the moneyed interest, and in achieving important social goods such as universal health care that the market has self-evidently failed to deliver.

But, in the end, the text failed because it tried to do too much, and ended up as so much scatter-shot on a page. I am sure it was written by someone who has actually spent time with the poor, but that was not evident in the text. I am sure whoever wrote the draft was deeply influenced by the Gospel, but that did not shine through in the text either. Go back and read ?Economic Justice for All.? It has more citations to Scripture in its first page that this text had in its entirety and, not to beat a dead horse, the Master had rather a lot to say about poverty. So,

the document did not secure the necessary two-thirds majority, although a majority of the bishops did approve it. Those who spoke against it were older bishops, but they were right to do so. Surely, our Church can do better than this. There is much that is important in this now rejected text and, in defense of its authors, 12-15 pages is good for a book review, but for the USCCB, they need a three page statement or a fifty page document, but otherwise you get something like this, a series of ambitious ideas requiring greater explication but reduced for space needs, that end up sounding vacuous. That, however, is not the real problem. The real problem is that in the1980s the bishops consulted widely with those who work with the poor - and with the poor themselves! Bishop Peter Rosazza may be retired but his moral authority on these issues is undimmed by age! ? and produced a text that empathized with their plight. This text read like a lecture, truncated and trimmed to fit a pre-ordained space limit. I do not know what tensions existed on the drafting committee. But, I must in conscience say something harsh here. Dear bishops: If you cannot find a way to say something significant about the poor, if that is not second nature to your conference, something has gone terribly wrong.

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