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Cardinal Newman Society Swings & Misses (Again!)

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 20, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

I do not know many people who worry as much as I do about Catholic identity. A priest friend routinely introduces me as a "Catholic fanatic." My three jobs - NCR, CUA and the Tablet - are all involved with the Church. And, in my writing, I am as often damned as praised for a certain stiff-neckedness about my Catholicism, a charge I accept and in which I relish.

But, the Cardinal Newman Society (CNS) gives Catholic identity a bad name. They are not zealous, they are Jansenists, obsessed with proving their RC bona fides by challenging the Catholic identity of others as insufficient. They claim they wish to promote the life of Catholic universities, but they actually seek to destroy it by incessantly insisting that all Catholic universities become univocal echo chambers where only the most orthodox of opinions are entertained. They do not wish to dialogue with anyone, still less try and convert anyone. They want our Catholic universities to be the educational equivalent of EWTN, filled with reassuring pieties, devoid of questioning, allergic to discussion and debate. Were Catholic institutions of higher learning to follow their lead, they would soon become second rate schools, incapable of shaping, let alone evangelizing, the culture. There was more debate in a pre-conciliar seminary than one finds in their narrow, ideologically rigid worldview.

Their latest target is Fordham University. The CNS is upset because the school canceled an appearance by Ann Coulter but hosted a seminar with Peter Singer. Of course, they do not seem to notice the difference between the two, Coulter being a shock-radio, cable news blowhard, and Singer an academic whose ideas are published and debated. Nor, does the CNS seem to understand that Singer has been engaged with a dialogue with prominent Catholic theologians, such as Fordham's Charles Camosy, on important issues in recent years and he has been moving a lot closer to the Catholic position than our theologians have been moving towards him. Of course, many of his views are repugnant. Of course, I would, if I were a college president, decline to give him an honor of any sort. But, dialogue and discussion and debate are part of the very fabric of university life. They give this away in their website statement when they state, "There is also something quite disturbing about Camosy inviting a dangerous provocateur into the classroom to prey on students who may be unprepared for such dialogue." Unprepared? How would they know? Even Jerry Falwell, who was scarcely a champion of academic freedom, and inserted notices in certain library books indicating that the contents did not cohere with the doctrines of his Church, had the courage to stare down critics of his invitation to Sen. Edward Kennedy to speak on the campus of Liberty University. Falwell answered his critics by observing that if the Church and the university were doing their job, they had nothing to fear from "one liberal pied piper" addressing the student body. "If, on the other hand, we have done our job, then guest lecturers of any persuasion will only sharpen the defensive skills of our students." Of course, I would seek more than the honing of "defensive skills" from such an encounter, but the point stands - The CNS has placed themselves in a more reactionary position than that of Rev. Falwell.

I have an idea. If our Church is to remain serious about the intellectual life of our Church and our culture, our bishops should publicly disassociate the Church from CNS. Have nothing to do with them. They are not modern day Torquemadas, to be sure. No, CNS is more like a modern day Daniele de Volterra, the artist who was hired

to cover the genitalia in Michelangelo's Last Judgment. They are prudes. And prudes do not generate culture, they suffocate it.

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