

"To Hell With It" - The Motu Proprio

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 4, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I wrote about Father George Rutler's article in *Crisis* magazine and how, in its tired repetition of neo-con talking points, it failed the Flannery O'Connor test, articulated in her comment about the Eucharist, "If it is just a symbol, then to hell with it." Today, I want to look at the recent motu proprio from the Vatican about the Catholic identity of the Church's charitable institutions. Unlike Rutler's article, I think the motu proprio passes Flannery's test.

[My colleague John Allen has highlighted](#) [1] the key parts of the document in four bullet points:

- A charitable group may call itself "Catholic" only with the written consent of church authorities. If a particular outfit is deemed to be no longer "in conformity with the church's teaching," the bishop should make that known and take steps to prevent it from using the title "Catholic."
- Personnel must "share, or at least respect" the Catholic identity of church-affiliated charitable organizations, and must also "give an example of Christian life" beyond their professional competence.
- A Catholic charity may not take money "from groups or institutions that pursue ends contrary to the church's teaching."
- To avoid leading people "into error or misunderstanding," bishops are to ensure that parishes and dioceses don't publicize initiatives "which, while presenting themselves as charitable, propose choices or methods at odds with the church's teaching."

Some will no doubt see in these items an agenda to separate the Church from the world. I can hear already the cries that the Holy See is turning its back on the openness of Vatican II. But, such concerns miss the point. Vatican II encouraged Catholics to engage the world, but it encouraged us to engage the world as Catholics, not to leave our Catholicism at the door.

As Catholics we are called to serve and to love the poor. We are called by the example of the Master. Our charities need not proselytize but the fact that our charities are rooted in the mystery of the Incarnate Word should be obvious to all, including those we serve. This rootedness in Christ should certainly be obvious to ourselves. Christianity is not simply about being kind, although it is certainly about that. It is about a radical commitment of self, in obedience to the example of Jesus. Our faith demands not merely good works but a disposition of our selves, a stance towards the world and especially to the poor, that is loving, truthful and beautiful.

With the rise of the modern industrial economy, our societies have found it necessary to create new ways of confronting new varieties of poverty. In almost all societies, government has come to play a larger role than it did previously in combating poverty. When poverty was a largely rural phenomenon, local attempts to alleviate the suffering of the poor often sufficed but when poverty became an urban phenomenon, and our urban population centers became more impersonal, government aid has become necessary. As I have noted before, in countries that were shaped by Christian Democratic governments, anti-poverty programs adopted robust social

welfare systems that were not centralized in government bureaucracies but employ a range of actors in civil society, most especially the charities of the churches, to address poverty. They looked to the government for the necessary funding, but they relied on non-governmental actors to execute many of the programs. Key policies such as living wages and a legally mandated role for labor in corporate decision-making made it less likely that the vagaries of the market would push people into poverty. Certain large scale problems like the delivery of health care entailed greater government involvement, although different states adopted different methodologies for achieving universal health insurance, all of them better than what we have in the U.S. I might add.

In recent years, the role of the government in providing social services has come into question. Indeed, there are questions that should be raised. Homogeneity is good for milk, but not necessarily good for solving complex, multi-faceted problems like poverty. There is no demonstrable evidence that Catholic charities are more successful than secular, government-run programs, but that is not really the point. The point is that a robust civil society is good for the health of society, over-reliance on distant government invites a one-size-fits-all approach that is often inefficient, resistant to change, and sometimes oppressive of local mores. Certainly, the scandal of poverty in the richest nation on earth invites an "all hands on deck" approach. I do not indulge the bashing of bureaucracy because bureaucracy is needed, but it comes with difficulties that need to be addressed and one of the ways to address its homogeneity is by allowing non-governmental actors a degree of autonomy, with respect for their institutional integrity, to operate in the same field.

That said, I don't think the document from the Vatican is really so concerned about the nature of civil society as it is about the institutional integrity of the Church. I have been harsh on the right for its willingness to reduce Christianity to a set of moral, mostly sexual, guidelines. I am also critical of a tendency on the left to reduce Catholicism to its social justice mission. That mission is a component, a necessary and critical component, but it flows from our Creed, it does not replace it. I thought the document issued during the campaign by some 100 theologians "On All of Our Shoulders" did a great job defending the social Magisterium. Most of the charges hurled against it sounded like they were written by the Romney campaign. But, one criticism caught my attention when a theologian friend expressed the wish that the text had contained a bit more Dorothy Day radicalism. (I will be writing about Dorothy Day tomorrow.) It is wrong to try and invoke Dorothy Day as a champion of small government in the manner of contemporary GOP talking points. But, Dorothy Day stood for the proposition that while government programs might help the poor, caring for the poor, loving them, living with them, this can change the world. Certainly, it can change us. And there is a word for that change: Conversion.

As I read the *motu proprio*, then, it is not so much about using our charities to convert others, but recognizing our charities to facilitate the on-going conversion of ourselves. Yes, helping the poor is a good thing to do. Yes, helping the poor will make us feel good about ourselves. But, as Catholics, we are called to help the poor out of obedience and fidelity to Christ. If we lose that, if we see our charities as little more than social service agencies with a saint's name attached, we have lost much. We have lost our soul.

I confess that I worry the Vatican document will be used by some not as an invitation to on-going conversion, but as a way to advance an ideological agenda. You will recall the attacks on the Catholic Campaign for Human Development a few years back. Those attacking CCHD were quite clear that they abhorred the idea that any organization that had used the thinking of Saul Alinsky could call itself Catholic, which is a bit like criticizing St. Thomas Aquinas because he used the thinking of the pagan Aristotle. For the bishops who are called to implement the Vatican's directives, I suggest using the sniff test. You do not have to spend a long time observing a charity or a hospital or a university in action to determine whether or not its Catholic identity is at the heart of its mission. If it is, stand up to the critics who have a different, and un-Christian agenda. If a given agency seems to have lost its Catholic identity, help them to recover it.

I try and help out at my parish's RCIA each year. And during Lent, they usually invite me to speak to those who

will be joining the Church about the Triduum. I always start by asking them a question: Other than Jesus, are there any other first century Jewish rabbis whom they think received an unjust punishment? Of course, they scratch their heads at this. I push on: The society in which Jesus lived viewed him as such a threat, such a charlatan, such a blasphemer, that they put him to death. Why should we quibble with their judgment? And, seeing as those who knew him best condemned him to death, why would we look to him, a criminal, for moral guidance? Why should we listen to anything this man, this criminal, this enemy of God and His people had to say?

The reason we quibble is because we believe the tomb was empty on Easter morning, that God had a different verdict on Jesus than that of the Romans and the High Priests. And because the tomb was empty, we then see Christ's teachings in a different light, not as suspect blasphemy, but as the Word of God. His ethical teachings are no longer threatening, they are the path to true happiness. His authority is not like human forms of power, it does not enslave. His authority liberates. This is the connection the Holy Father is looking for: Do our charities ? and not just our charities but our entire lives ? can we explain them as related to the empty tomb? Can we see them as a part of the full and entire self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ and worked out, through the centuries, by the Church? Because, if our charities are exceedingly efficient, if they genuinely help the poor improve their condition, if they alleviate suffering and misery, but have not love, the love of Christ, at their core, then they, too, have become a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal.

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