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The Vatican Ambassadorship

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 18, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The speculation over who will serve as the next U.S. ambassador to the Holy See has gone from whispering to campaigning. A new article at the Catholic News Agency [1], an outfit which is marginally more trustworthy than Pravda under Breshnev, and which famously had to qualify direct quotes it attributed to Cardinal Francis George which the cardinal said he never spoke, is not so much a report on the race for the ambassadorship as a drive-by shooting of two of the most frequently mentioned names: Catholic University?s Stephen Schneck and Duquesne Law School?s Nicholas Cafardi.

Full disclosure. Both Schneck and Cafardi are friends. Professor Schneck is also the Director of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies where I am a visiting fellow. I have frequently called on both men for analysis of political and religious affairs, and both men always afford pithy quotes that get to the heart of any given matter. Both men are deeply read in Catholic theology and political philosophy and keen students of current trends, capable of seeing things the rest of us do not see, discerning underlying trends or motives or facts-on-the-ground that account for a given situation.

Both men also love the Church deeply, which is why these attacks are so repulsive. In the case of Schneck, I can recall a dozen situations where what Cardinal George called ?simple Catholicism,? shone through, from the hospitality he offers at his home to his devotion to attending Mass to his penchant for requesting Masses for the deceased relatives of friends to his concern to make sure clerics who visit Catholic University for one of the Institute?s conferences have the opportunity to say their daily Mass to his compassion for the poor which is not confined to charitable donations but expressed in the assistance he offers directly to those who are struggling. Just the other day, when I had to cancel a meeting to take one of my dogs to the vet, Steve, mindful of the fact that I do not have a car, offered to drive the hour to my house, pick us up, and drive the hour to the vet, and then make the return trips as well. That is the kind of kindness one does not often find among the busy and successful people who populate Washington.

Professionally, Schneck has worked hand-in-glove with different offices at the USCCB, with Catholic Relief Services, with the Catholic Association of Latino Leaders and the Catholic Coalition for Climate Change, and with other Catholic groups, organizing conferences that call attention to important issues. At the planning meetings, Schneck?s range of political and media contacts, his organizational capabilities, his ability to distinguish a central from a peripheral issue, all are vital to making these conferences a success. He brought Cardinal Peter Turkson to CUA two years ago for a conference on Rerum Novarum. This past autumn, the Institute sponsored a very important conference on the international implications of religious liberty, an event that featured major speeches and presentations by Cardinal Dolan, Archbishop, now Cardinal, John Onaiyekan of Nigeria, Archbishop Tomasi from the Holy See?s delegation to the UN agencies in Geneva, Cardinal Sean O?Malley, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop Thomas Wenski, Bishop Gerald Kicanas, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, and Bishop Martin Hollay. If Schneck is persona non grata among the hierarchy as the Catholic News Agency implies, someone forgot to mention it to these prelates.

The idea that Schneck is less than committed to the pro-life issue is a lie. The CNA article suggests that his

affiliation with Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good is suspect. Did CNA take the time to read CACG?s voter guide, which Schneck essentially authored? It is profoundly rooted in Catholic teaching and does not mince words about the tragedy of abortion. Did they read Schneck?s article at CACG opposing physician assisted suicide in Massachusetts, which was one of many efforts Schneck made to help defeat that pernicious proposal? Schneck has been at every Right-to-Life March I have attended and helped organize a pro-life event, the only pro-life event, at last year?s Democratic National Convention. He opposed the President?s original mandate but argued that the accommodation, if the details were filled in, might work. I disagreed with him on that last point, and we are all waiting to see the details. But, I know this: If the administration reaches a better outcome for the Church in the on-going negotiations it will be in large part because of Schneck?s relentlessly making the case that the administration must do better.

I do not know Cafardi as well, mostly because he lives in Pittsburgh not in Washington, but whenever he comes to DC, we meet for a meal and an equally delicious conversation. Those conversations, too, show evidence of someone deeply committed to the life of the Church. Cafardi has degrees in both canon and civil law and assisted Cardinal Wuerl in both capacities when Wuerl was the bishop of Pittsburgh. He was the first chairman of the USCCB?s lay review board on the sexual abuse of children, and is widely credited with helping the bishops come to grips with the crisis in 2002. Cafardi also attends every Right-to-Life March and was critical in securing the nomination and election of pro-life Senator Bob Casey in Pennsylvania. He goes to Rome every summer to teach a course so he knows the lay of the land there very well.

Both men have the temperament to be a diplomat, which might escape some of their critics who lack that temperament. Both men would bring different credentials to the job: I suspect Cafardi has better contacts in the Vatican Curia and Schneck has better contacts in the Obama administration, but both men possess the stature and the personality that would permit them to establish whatever relationships this job would require. They are really nice guys in addition to being really smart guys.

I have long admired Congressman Lipinski, but he has a reputation for shooting-from-the-hip, and as often as not, taking pot shots at the President. Giving him an ambassadorial stage might yield unhappy results. I do not know Ken Hackett and so cannot comment on his candidacy.

The criticisms against Schneck and Cafardi seem to be that they have not reached the conclusion that Obama is anathema. This is true. Also true that the President is unlikely to name a severe critic of himself to any post in his gift. But, more importantly, as I have stated repeatedly, I can understand why some people, in good conscience, believe that voting for a pro-choice candidate is impossible for themselves, and I can understand why others, like Schneck and Cafardi, consider abortion a large issue but one on which the GOP has manifestly failed to deliver and, in any event, an issue that does not consign all other issues to irrelevance, and so find their conscience at peace, if not exactly undisturbed, when casting a vote for a pro-choice candidate. Voting for a Democrat is not enough to make one a bad Catholic ? or else we have a hell of a lot of bad Catholics in this country!

The life issues require re-examination. Not the morality ? that is easy. We all know abortion is wrong. Schneck and Cafardi know it is wrong. The question voters must have is ? what can be done about it? There is no room for disagreement about the moral evil of abortion. There is great disagreement, indeed there is a great need for discussion, about how we can make our culture a culture of life, or at least move it in that direction. I can assure my pro-life friends at CNA that no progress will happen if they constantly seek to cut down pro-life Democrats: Movement on the abortion will have to become bipartisan or it will never happen. And, at the center of that discussion will be pro-life Democrats like Schneck and Cafardi.

Of course, it is important to love the Church, but it is also important for any prospective ambassador to love the United States. Both Schneck and Cafardi, at different times and in different ways, have expressed profound and

deep concerns about the culture of death and destruction that we have created here in the U.S. Both men are deeply committed to the democratic process, and the education that is essential to making that process work, unafraid to say that we must bring our Church?s moral and spiritual influences to bear on our culture and our political life but also mindful that doing so in a pluralistic society requires tact, a capacity to listen as well as to speak, a dialogical personality if you will. Both Cafardi and Schneck not only see the necessity of these traits in others, they evidence these traits in their lives. I cannot think of two men who could more ably serve the United States at the Holy See. And, if the reporters at CNA had called around, I think they would find that most of the US bishops agree.

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