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The Inauguration: A Review

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Distinctly Catholic

As American civic liturgies go, nothing trumps an inauguration. Yet, watching the proceedings yesterday, I could not help feel that our civic rituals are somewhat pale in comparison to those of the country against which we rebelled in 1776. Couldn?t we have just paid the tax on the tea and kept Westminster Abbey as a focal point for such rituals? Alas, thank God we had the latest installment of Downton Abbey the night before.

There was a church service before the civic ceremony, held in the small but beautiful St. John?s Episcopal Church, across the street from the White House. For reasons I do not understand, that service was not televised. Even for crass political reasons it should have been: A significant number of Americans are not sure if the President is a Christian. Showing him at such a service might diminish that number, no? Cardinal Wuerl prayed one of the readings and kudos to him for not treating the President and the day like a pariah.

At the Capitol, I understand the reasons why, in 1980, these ceremonies were moved to the West Front of the building, which is the back side. The venue allows the President to look out over the vast expanse of the Mall towards the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial beyond. In the case of President Obama?s inaugural, both the last and this one, the addition area afforded by this location was needed. If you look back at pictures of previous inaugurations, you do not see the vast throngs that assembled in 2009 and again yesterday. Still, there is something clunky about the stage that is erected, much less dignified than the canopied stage that graced the East Front when inaugurations were held there.

The ceremony began with Sen. Charles Schumer of New York, who chaired the inaugural committee. Mr. Schumer seemed to think the crowd had come to listen to him and he delivered what amounted to his own inaugural address. Four years ago, Sen. Diane Feinstein was much more brief and kept the focus on the principals not herself. The opening prayer was entrusted to a laywoman and it was meandering. Then, a bright spot. A choir from the Brooklyn Tabernacle sang the Battle Hymn of the Republic, which should be our national anthem, and they stuck to the original words. In 1996, for reasons that have roots deep in the mind of Bill Clinton, a choir sang the same tune but changed the words ?As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free? to ?As He died to make men holy, let us live to make men free.? Icky. So ?90?s. After all, do we really have to die to make men free now that we have the internet?

The other musical selections were more questionable. Call me a snob, but to go from Aretha Franklin, Yo-yo Ma, and Yitzhak Perlman to Kelly Clarkson, James Taylor and Beyonce, well, this suggests a decline. The National Anthem is dreadful enough, but is there anything worse than the kind of artistic interpretations of the music of the kind Beyonce furnished? Better to keep it as militaristic as it essentially is. And, what to say of Ms. Clarkson? She has a powerful instrument in her throat, to be sure, but she might try deploying it on pitch one day.

The President?s nineteen minute speech was mercifully short by Obama standards. It was not a unifying speech. The reference to ?takers? seemed aimed directly at the Republicans in his midst. Indeed, the overall emphasis

was decidedly anti-libertarian and, just so, a welcome tonic. Obama?s defense of entitlements was especially strong. He mentioned the word ?together? seven times. And, he suggested, without details, the broad outlines of an essentially populist economic platform that warms the hearts of Democrats but I am sure left Republicans feeling cold. I was pleased to hear t he President mention climate change, an issue that received far too little attention in his first term but which has profound implications for both the social justice concerns of Catholics and for our pro-life concerns.

One of the most commented upon parts of the speech was the way the President linked the struggle for equality for blacks, and women, and gays, to the nation?s founding creed. This was especially strong and, in this setting, seemed aimed in part at his base but also in part and the center of the electorate. Obviously, he was not reaching out to traditional Republican voters by including gays in the mantra, but by linking the struggle for gay equality with the earlier struggles, he was challenging those Americans who may be ambivalent on the issue of gay rights to see it in a different light. I would be very interested to know what black pastors thought of that passage. Did it strike home? Did it cause them to see the issue differently?

For me, the most interesting part of the entire event came when Associate Supreme Court Justice Sonya Sotomayor administered the oath of office to Vice President Joseph Biden. The presidential oath is prescribed in the Constitution, but the Vice President takes the same oath as other government leaders. It contains a curious phrase with its roots in British anti-Catholicism. Mr. Biden said that he took his oath ?without any mental reservation.? Here, in this phrase, we are brought back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Catholics wondered if they could take the Oath of Supremacy and some Jesuit priests told their flocks that they could take the oath with mental reservation because the people demanding the oath had no right to require it. That bit of casuistry struck English Protestants as unmanly at best and deceitful at worst, and so this clause was added to British oaths and, subsequently, to oaths in early America. Yesterday was the first time a Catholic justice administered the oath with these once, profoundly anti-Catholic words to a Catholic Vice President. We?ve come a long way.

Then the parade, then the ball, neither of which interested me much. It was a far cry from a coronation in Westminster Abbey, to be sure. And, I understand that there is something noble about the simplicity of our public rituals. Still, it seems to me that God plays such a bit part in such rituals, and that without Him, we always end up with a distorted notion of who we are as human beings. There will be a prayer service at the National Cathedral today that will add a bit of liturgical and theistic oomph to the inauguration. I do not want an established religion on most days, but there is something to be said for one on days like inauguration day. Our civic rituals are a little thin. And, it is far from clear to me how they could be otherwise.

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