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The Itch That Is Dangerous

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 15, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

All this week, those of us who write about the Church for a living have had some interesting conversations with our more well-known colleagues in the press who know little about the Church. Actually, strike that last comment. I have been studying and reading about the Church for all of my adult life and I still know little about it. There are vast areas of study I have not engaged, whole regions that remain opaque, and theological debates I have not jumped into, and, as I say, I have been at this for more than thirty years.

In these conversations, there always comes the point when the secular reporter or producer asks some variation of the same question: If the Church is so pro-life and so opposed to gay marriage, so conservative politically, and yet is so relatively progressive on economic and social justice issues, what accounts for this inconsistency? It is my favorite part of these discussions because you get to take a deep breath, audible across the phone lines, and reply, ?You presume the inconsistency is in the Church but what if the inconsistency is in our politics??

Another instance of the way ideological inconsistency works its way into American politics is found in a recent campaign by Republican advocates of immigration reform to point out the anti-life positions of some of the nation?s most vocal and successful anti-immigrant groups. The Washington Post put the story [1]on the front page today, noting, among other evidences, that the co-founder of the anti-immigrant group Federation for American Immigration Reform, John Tanton, was an early leader in the ?zero population growth? movement. Tanton also played a key role in founding other anti-immigrant groups. The Post story quotes Kevin Appleby, the USCCB?s point man on immigration, as saying, ?pro-life legislators should think twice about working with these groups, as their underlying goals are inconsistent with a pro-life agenda.?

Why is anyone surprised? If someone denies the fundamental, innate human dignity of the migrant, why should we be surprised that they are not particularly concerned about the dignity of the unborn or the elderly? Why would someone who thinks it is fine to recommend euthanasia as a ?solution? for our growing elderly population not think that mass deportation is the most effective means of dealing with migration? Yet, many Republican politicians in the piece do show they are surprised.

Of course, the phenomenon cuts both ways. Liberals must ask themselves why they are so deeply, and rightly, committed to the rights of the undocumented and so deaf to the right-to-life of the unborn? It does not take a lot of research to recognize that Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, was a racist, that she spoke at Ku Klux Klan rallies for a reason or, as I like to say, that she put the ?hood? into Planned Parenthood. But, even I was stunned when I researched her writings in the Birth Control Review to discover just how committed she was to eugenics.

Sanger was not alone. In the 1920s, many states in the U.S., adopted eugenic policies, especially towards the mentally disabled. (The memory of those days is why the disabled community is one of the Church?s strongest allies in the fight against euthanasia and physician assisted suicide.) We all recall the justification rendered by the great liberal Supreme Court jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., for his decision in Buck v. Bell that

permitted the Commonwealth of Virginia to sterilize a mentally disabled woman, Carrie Buck, against her will: ?Three generations of imbeciles are enough.? Such thoughts were quite common in the 1920s and 1930s, before Josef Mengele gave eugenics a bad name.

Eugenics grew out of a very human, and often very commendable, ambition, the itch to improve. But, eugenics also shows the ways that itch can run amok and miscarry in frightful ways. This itch is not limited to manipulation of human genetics. Think of all the ?progress? that has resulted in the environment being imperiled, from the dams that have changed delicate eco-systems to the frightening effects of climate change. Think of the way America exports its consumerist-capitalist values abroad, bringing material prosperity to many to be sure, but also introducing a spiritual poverty into traditional cultures.

Those who think the Church is wrong to be so hidebound by tradition, who don?t see the need for the Church to work through complicated issues in the light of its long tradition of reflection and reasoning regarding the human condition, are always chomping at the but for ?progress.? I was asked by a television producer the other day if the new Pope would champion progress on the issue of abortion. ?Would that be progress?? I asked. ?Or would it be decline??

If you have the itch to improve the human condition, God love you. I am deeply grateful to those medical researchers who came up with ways to treat heart disease, resulting in the fact that my Dad is alive and well today. I am deeply grateful to the person who first had the idea of putting wheels on luggage. I honor the memory of Thomas Edison for coming up with ways to use electricity. But, beware that itch, too. It can run amok in the twinkling of an eye and lead to some very unhumane conclusions.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/effort-to-change-immigration-law-sparks-internal-battle-within-gop/2013/02/13/2916d164-740a-11e2-aa12-e6cf1d31106b_story.html