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MSW & Sr. Laurie Brink

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 18, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, CNN was roundly criticized for broadcasting premature reports that a suspect had been arrested in the Boston Marathon case when, in fact, no such arrest had been made. And I was criticized, both in the comments and by emails from people I respect for my post which included an inadequate characterization of Sr. Laurie Brink?s keynote address [1] at an LCWR conference which, in turn, became one of the items mentioned in the doctrinal assessment of the LCWR.

The key sentence I wrote, and regret, was this: ?I gotta tell you. They lost me with that choice of a keynote speaker who wants to ?move beyond Jesus.?? Sr. Brink did not, in fact, say she wants to ?move beyond Jesus? and it was sloppy shorthand for me to say that she did.

I decided it was a good idea to go back and re-read Sr. Brink?s talk and, unfortunately, I must say that it is even worse than my mischaracterization suggested. It is true that she did not advocate moving beyond Jesus. It is also true that the speech, in its entirety, is not only the kind of theological talk that is likely to catch the attention of the CDF, it is the kind of theological talk that deserves to catch the attention of the CDF.

The Caveat: I repeat what I wrote yesterday. ?The doctrinal assessment was handled badly. Yes, the assessment was hatched stateside by priests and prelates without the courage to do the task themselves. Yes, the relationship of power between the bishops and the sisters is a large one and, for the sisters, it is understandable that any investigation will be welcomed as an attack.? Indeed, re-reading Sr. Brink?s talk, I realize that the doctrinal assessment was unfair in part because it mistook her particular theological views as typical of religious women in America. More on this at the end.

Sr. Brink begins her talk by expressing her enthusiasm for post-modernism. ?One of the benefits of Post-Modernism?the wholesale critique of modernity and its reliance on objectivity and western assumptions that there is one obtainable ?Truth?? is that we are more readily able to recognize the place of subjectivity. If you and I look at the same cluster of clouds, we will doubtlessly see something different. It might look like a giant hand to me, but a spreading tree to you. Post-modernism allows that both you and I are correct. We are simply viewing the same thing through a different lens.? Of course, I share Sr. Brink?s distaste for modernity?s over-reliance on the power of Cartesian reason, but I do not respond to this distaste by ordering an entrée of post-modernist drivel. I respond, as I think Christians must, by discerning a deeper understanding of reason, one that is open to revelation and, just so, to the Paschal Mystery in which objectivity and subjectivity are brought together in the person of Jesus Christ.

Sr. Brink writes this about the four possible directions in which religious life is moving in the U.S. ?In light of my own experience, conversations with myriad other religious and critical reflection on the signs of the times, I can recognize four different general ?directions? in which religious congregations seem to be moving. Not one of the four is better or worse than the others. The difficulty lies not in the directions themselves but in getting the congregation as a whole to discern together the best approach and to commit together to that end.? The

?moving beyond Jesus? theme is one of these ?four different general directions.? So, while it is true that at the end of her talk, she advocates a different direction, here, in setting out the four general directions, she affirms that ?Not one of the four is better or worse than the others. The difficulty lies not in the directions themselves?? So, yes, she does not say that ?moving beyond Jesus? is for her, but, trapped in her post-modern paradigm, moving beyond Jesus is no better or worse than not moving beyond Jesus. My friends ? this is the dictatorship of relativism.

More interesting than the bit about moving beyond Jesus was Sr. Brink?s treatment of a different direction, which she labels ?Acquiescence to Others? Expectations.? The text is very confused. On the one hand, she starts with the Biblical account of Martha and Mary and writes, ?Mary symbolizes those religious communities who have chosen to acquiesce to the recent urgings of the Church hierarchy to become more visible and ?faithful.?? Mary, of course, sat at the foot of the Lord. Is Sr. Brink equating the Church hierarchy with the Lord? Perhaps alert to the danger, her next paragraph includes some condescending remarks about more traditional religious communities, writing that ?these groups are recognizing the changing atmosphere in the institutional Church, the reneging on the promises of Vatican II?.They are taking seriously Pope John Paul II?s call to pursue holiness above all else.? I know some women in traditional religious communities and I do not think they would characterize their apostolate as ?reneging on the promises of Vatican II.? They most certainly would agree that a central theme of Vatican II was the universal call to holiness and that, yes, they pursue such holiness above all else. Isn?t that a good thing? Or are these more traditional women mere dupes of a pre-modern worldview?

When Sr. Brink does consider the ?moving beyond Jesus? direction, the condescension disappears. These women who have abandoned their tradition are ?courageous? and ? here comes the post-modernism ? ?who?s to say that the movement beyond Christ is not, in reality, a movement into the very heart of God?? Well, as Sr. Brink learned, within the Catholic communion, it is the CDF that says the movement beyond Christ is not a movement to the very heart of God. It is a shame, a damned shame, that the leadership of the LCWR gave a lectern to this post-modern nonsense. Not because it gave the CDF a hook to hang its indictment on, but because, as far as I can tell, the reason so many people love religious women, the reason our sisters touch the hearts of Catholics and non-Catholics so deeply is precisely because they have not moved beyond Christ but seek him out, day in and day out, among the poor, the afflicted, the aged, the ignorant, and the broken-hearted. It is because religious women do as Jesus instructed in performing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy that they are leaders in the Church. No amount of academic nonsense, spoken from someone wallowing in post-modern fads, should obstruct the Church?s hierarchy from recognizing the invaluable, Christ-centered work, that religious women do every day.

The part of the CDF?s assessment that bothered me was its mention of NETWORK, the organization that works to promote a more just society. You have only to spend five minutes with a sister at NETWORK to realize that their work is rooted in Christ, that they find Him where He told us we could find Him, in the poor. You have only to look at the way the ?Nuns on the Bus? captured the attention of the nation ? exactly as Pope Francis has captured the attention of the world ? to recognize that the Church?s credibility is rooted in its care for the poor, not because we are a bunch of do-gooders but because our care for the poor is itself an expression of obedience to the Lord. I would submit that there is something objective about this datum of salvation history: The Lord hears the cry of the poor and the Church is at her best when she hears that cry too.

Sr. Brink, as noted, spoke of those religious communities who ?Acquiesce to Others? Expectations.? I would suggest that the next annual meeting of the LCWR have a talk about the need for all Christians to ?Acquiesce to the Other?s Expectations,? the need to acquiesce, to self-surrender, to bind ourselves, to the expectations of the Lord Jesus, an expectation that we will make holiness our principal goal, an expectation that we must treat the hungry and the lame and the thirsty and the imprisoned as we would treat Him, and the expectation that it is wrong, both subjectively wrong and objectively wrong, to think that there is greater salvation in the tired and ultimately lazy comforts of post-modernism than there is in the Lord?s explicit words, ?I am the way, the truth

and the life.?

I regret using shorthand in describing Sr. Brink?s talk yesterday in a way that suggested she said something she did not say. And, I am grateful for the fraternal correction I received. Felix culpa. The correction reminded me that the one sentence about ?moving beyond Jesus? was not the problem with Sr. Brink?s talk. The whole thing was dreadful and alarming. I believe with all my heart that women religious are just as much leaders of the Church as the bishops. They deserve better than this faux-intellectual, post-modern nonsense. I hope they realize it too.

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[1] https://lcwr.org/sites/default/files/calendar/attachments/2007_Keynote_Address-Laurie_Brink-OP.pdf