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Contra Neumayr on Immigration

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 30, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

I will say one thing for Mr. George Neumayr, whose essay at RealClearReligion.com yesterday [1]caught my eye: He is not difficult to parse. He says what he means and mean what he says. Of course, history is filled with scoundrels who did not prevaricate; still let us acknowledge that this is a man with a capacity to speak his mind.

He notes at the outset of his essay: ?What they [the U.S. bishops] call on their web page the ?Catholic Church's position on Immigration Reform? is not orthodox teaching but tired left-wing clericalism.? He goes on to assert that the bishops blur the line between Church teaching and personal political opinions because such a blurry line ?allows them to play lobbyists for their pet political causes, from global warming to gun control to amnesty.?

These assertions raise the question: What planet is Mr. Neumayr living on? Today?s USCCB is hardly a hotbed of left-wing anything. The bishops have spent precious little time or resources advocating for policies that address global warming or gun control or immigration reform compared to the millions spent fighting the HHS mandate and same-sex marriage. Was there a ?Fortnight for Immigrants? that I missed? Can anyone point me to a bishop in the U.S. who has done what the Bishop of Rome has done, both the current incumbent and his immediate predecessor, to focus the attention of the Church on the moral imperative of addressing climate change? And, beyond some letters to members of Congress, I have been underwhelmed by the USCCB?s activities in pursuit of sane gun control legislation.

Mind you, I want the bishops to be engaged I the public square on all these issues. I want them fighting for religious freedom and for comprehensive immigration reform. And, I want them fighting for efforts to stop global climate change as well as for policies that will lower the abortion rate. As mentioned previously, I think they need to re-calibrate their defense of traditional marriage, but I have no problem with them advocating for it in the public square. I would like the bishops to think ? and to hire a lay staff that will help them to achieve the thought ? that one of the reasons for them to approach issues with a greater sense of partisan balance is so that they do not appear like political pawns of either party, that it is clear that their concerns are transcendent concerns, and that while they leave wide room for disagreement on policy particulars, nonetheless it is emphatically their job as pastors, as well as teachers, to call out injustice when they see it.

Sadly, Mr. Neumayr is confused in other ways as well. He writes:

Does disagreeing with the bishops on something as technical and complicated as "earned citizenship" really make one less understanding of the true nature of justice? Is a Catholic "anti-immigrant" if he favors, say, legal residency rather than legal citizenship? There is no "Catholic teaching" on the precise form of a state's regulation of legal immigration, much less its handling of illegal immigration.

It is true that there is greater certainty at the level of principle. This is as true for bishops as it is for lay people. But, the fact that an issue is complicated does not demand silence. It demands prudence. And there is Catholic teaching on the rights of immigrants, clear, explicit teaching, from both our bishops and from our popes. If a

situation confers only second-class citizenship, or no citizenship at all, on 11 million Americans, the bishops are not wrong to say that such a situation is unjust and, just so, opposed to Catholic teaching.

Neumayr?s confusion runs deep. He writes, ?Can'?t they see that in their desperate craving for political relevance they make the Church?s most important contribution to politics, the transmission of natural-law orthodoxy, irrelevant?? The phrase ?natural-law orthodoxy? stands out. Obviously, ?orthodoxy? has to do with right belief, but natural law is not about belief, it is about a philosophic way of viewing the world, useful in explicating the Church?s teachings, but not in any sense a matter of orthodoxy. If he does not understand the distinction between philosophy and theology, he should go back to school, or at least get a copy of a dissertation written many years back on why a precept of the natural law can never be supported as a doctrinal claim. For example, natural law can be used to help apply and explain a magisterial teaching, a teaching rooted in the self-revelation of Jesus Christ entrusted to the Church, but it is not itself a magisterial claim. That dissertation was written by a young priest, Fr. William Levada.

What is most disconcerting about Neumayr?s article is its venom. If he wishes to disagree with the bishops, fine. If he thinks that they are applying the teaching of the Church incorrectly, show how and why. But, is it necessary to charge them with ?clericalism? because they see the injustice of our current immigration system and try to right it? One gets the feeling that he heard someone at a cocktail party make the charge and decided to repeat it in print, without so much as a single piece of evidence to support the charge. In the end, Neumayr is one of those Catholics who thinks the bishops are needed in the public square, but only if they agree with him. This is not an intellectual stance, it is solipsism.

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[1] http://www.realclearreligion.org/articles/2013/04/29/render_unto_bishops.html