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Bad Judgment at Heritage & USCCB

Michael Sean Winters | May. 10, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Let?s look at two unrelated news stories.

First, the Heritage Foundation is receiving intense criticism [1] for its report claiming immigration reform will cost more than $6 trillion. One of the authors of the report, the man we are told was the ?numbers cruncher? is Jason Richwine. In his doctoral dissertation, Richwine claimed that Hispanic immigrants have a lower IQ than white Americans, and that this differential is likely to continue for at least two generations. And, while the report had several authors, its key eye-popping claim was a number, more than $6 trillion, so the fact that Heritage employed a racist to provide them with the numbers is deeply troubling.

Second, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has prepared a bulletin insert [2] in advance of the expected Supreme Court rulings on same-sex marriage. In that bulletin insert, they state, ?A broad negative ruling could redefine marriage in the law throughout the entire country, becoming the ?Roe v. Wade? of marriage.? One knows what they *meant* to say: In 1973, the Supreme Court inserted itself into a political debate about abortion that short-circuited the legislative process, a process that might have better captured the ambivalence many Americans feel about abortion, declared abortion a constitutional right, casting the debate in categorical terms, and frustrating further discussion and analysis of the issue.

The common problem in both cases is a lack of judgment. Why would a think tank entrust the task of numbers crunching to someone who holds racist views? Did anyone check his math? Heritage is certainly not responsible for Richwine?s earlier claims and writings, but they are responsible for asking themselves why this man passed the sniff test.

In the case of the USCCB bulletin insert, did anyone think to say, ?Wait a minute. Cardinal Dolan said on national television that the bishops need to do a better job communicating the fact that their defense of traditional marriage is not mere anti-gay bigotry. Does comparing same sex marriage to abortion help?? I know, I know. The natural law. I have said it before and will say it again: We Catholics employ natural law as our principal means for addressing a range of complicated social and political issues. But, most other people do not. Pope Benedict recognized this when he said that natural law reasoning had become a ?blunt instrument? and set it aside in his public discussion with Jurgen Habermas on the secularization of ethics. Natural law or no, it is offensive to compare what some people think is a form of equality with the act of destroying a child in the womb.

We may think that the LGBT community is mistaken, that no one has a ?right? to marry, that marriage is ordained in one way and not another way, but we must recognize that other people, lots of other people, see it differently, and that such a difference is not the same thing as the difference between killing an unborn child and letting the child live. Only on the list of ?non-negotiables? devised by Catholic Republican activists do abortion and same sex marriage belong together. As I have written before, all the Church?s teachings are, in a sense ?non-negotiable? but when a list of priorities is devised that only contains items that cohere with one political party,

that list does not pass the sniff test.

It is wrong to judge a person by the friends he or she keeps. This too easily descends into guilt by association. But, any organization must ask itself if it is getting balanced, prudential advice. I do not doubt that a man who thinks Hispanics are intellectually inferior would search out and highlight numbers that frustrate immigration reform. I do not doubt that someone working at the bishops? conference might not know who to vet a text with, to see if it is offensive. It has been a long time since the USCCB hired any Democrats.

We should all assume the people at Heritage, including Richwine, are sincere, even though we find their politics repugnant. I know many of the people at the USCCB and know that they are sincere, that they love the Church, that they act with the best of motives and I share their many of their public policy objectives. But, I wonder if the politicians debating immigration reform, or the bishops concerned about traditional marriage, are well served when the advice they get is drawn from only one side of the political aisle. If someone only watches Fox News, they will have a vastly distorted view of the political landscape, they will never hear the opposite side of an argument presented sympathetically. The same goes for MSNBC from the opposite angle. Politicians vested with the task of promoting the general welfare, and bishops charged with shepherding a diverse flock, cannot watch only the one or the other or they will, over time, fail to discern red flags, like Richwine?s dissertation, or they will overlook it because this person is a friend of a friend, or they will dismiss it as a concern raised by ?the enemy? on the other side of the political debate. That results in poor judgment.

I do not give a hoot what happens to Heritage and its reputation, but I do about the USCCB. Too many times in the past couple of years, a statement has come out that looked like it was drawn up by a group of Republican political operatives. If the Church?s concerns are transcendent, and they are, they must be presented in a way that contains no hint of ideological blindedness or partisan leaning. It doesn?t take much. All it takes is someone at the table willing and able to say, ?Hey, do we really want to compare same sex marriage and abortion??

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[1] http://www.politico.com/story/2013/05/heritage-foundation-immigration-reform-91148.html?hp=l3
[2] http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/promotion-and-defense-of-marriage/upload/Bulletin-Insert-Marriage-and-the-Supreme-Court-Spring-2013.pdf