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Prudence & Mr. Carr

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

The Institute on Religion & Democracy has a new rising star, Ms. Marjorie Jeffrey, who has decided to tackle my friend John Carr in this commentary at their website. Her charge: Carr has abandoned, or at least slighted, the cardinal virtue of prudence in an article in which he called out cafeteria Catholics on the right who invoke prudential judgment as a kind of get-out-jail-free card, as Meghan Clark memorably termed it. Carr was not arguing that prudence is not a virtue, still less that it is unimportant in the world of politics. What he was arguing is that the same commitment to human dignity that leads Catholics to defend the unborn should lead them to defend the undocumented.

Ms. Jeffrey, however, thinks immigration policy requires prudential judgment in assessing alternative approaches to what is, admittedly, a complicated issue. And here we see what is by now a familiar conservative shell game? Fr. Sirico tried to play this game with me in our debate in Colorado in January. Abortion, same sex marriage, these are intrinsic or grave or serious evils and they are, as Ms. Jeffrey says, non-negotiable? No Catholic can support abortion. Immigration, or spending on programs to aid the poor, these require prudential judgment and so Catholics can disagree with their bishops.

Ms Jeffrey writes:

[T]here is a clear difference here; resort to abortion is never a matter of prudential judgment, since it is intrinsically evil. Resort to the death penalty is always a matter of prudential judgment, since it depends on a number of factors.

You can see the shell game instantly: Yes, abortion is a grave evil (and the fact that it is grave is more relevant politically and legally than the fact that it is intrinsic). But, it also requires prudential judgment to

decide how to legislate to protect the unborn. The comparison is not between the act of abortion and the efficacy of an immigration policy. Both involve moral absolutes ? protect human life, care for the vulnerable. Both also involve prudential judgment ? how do we propose to protect the unborn? What policies will allow us to fulfill the clear command of Scripture to care for the stranger in our midst? So, both abortion and immigration entail first principles and both entail prudential judgment. Efforts to contrast moral absolutes and prudential judgment are a shell game which, in the hands of a certain type of conservative Catholic, is used primarily to advance a political agenda.

All law, in some sense, entails both principles and prudence. A policy idea might be efficacious but it might violate a constitutional provision, a principle such as free speech or freedom of religion. On the other hand, certainly cheating on one's spouse is a grave moral evil but adultery is not fit for the criminal code. (Although, there is something about this Religion & Democracy crowd that brings to mind childhood visits to Salem.)

Ms. Jeffrey makes the kind of agitprop mistakes that have become tiresome but no less frequent on account of their tiresomeness. She writes, "For example, knowingly to vote for a pro-choice politician is deemed a mortal sin for a baptized Catholic." Really? Who so deemed this? If they did, they were wrong. In a more sinister fashion, she tries to smear Carr and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, repeating the worst distortions about CCHD's involvement with other groups in true McCarthyite fashion. But, when preaching to the right wing choir, there is nothing like the name "Soros" to cast the magic spell of contempt.

Ms. Jeffrey finishes with a paragraph that seems to confirm, not contradict, the article by Carr that got this whole ball rolling. She writes:

Christian principles ought always to inform prudential judgment, since faith and reason are partners in the eternal dance of creation. To divorce them is a mistake. To attempt to silence rational discourse about the proper role of government and prudent courses of public policy in the name of Catholic teaching is, in the most charitable of views, misleading. Mr. Carr is correct that the views of Catholic bishops deserve serious attention. But they may not always deserve action.

Mr. John Carr has done many things in his life but attempting to "silence rational discourse" is not one of them. He was challenging Catholics on both sides of the aisle to ask themselves if they let the Church's teaching affect all their politics or do they do the Catholic cafeteria routine, picking and choosing what they like. Likewise, Carr was not advocating a blind obedience to every utterance from the USCCB, only for an even-handed treatment of the concerns the conference raises.

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Ms. Jeffrey may grow into a fierce and formidable intellectual sparring partner. But, she would be well advised to stop playing the shell game. You are not defending prudence, Ms. Jeffrey. You are defending Potemkin.

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