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Pope Francis Vs. GOP

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 17, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Pope Francis sent a letter [1] to British Prime Minister David Cameron in advance of this week?s G-8 summit. Cameron is hosting the summit in Belfast. The pope?s comments could not be more at odds with some of the truly vile positions being taken by many Republican congressmen, including many Catholics, in recent days.

Let?s start with the pope. He commends the G-8 for making it a priority of this year?s summit to take steps to end hunger and establish food security. This, the pope noted, was precisely the kind of focus on the human person that is too often lacking from political and economic decision making. The pope also noted this focus on the human person in the agenda item dealing with sex crimes in areas of conflict and human trafficking.

But, the pope went further. He wrote:

The actions included on the agenda of the British G8 Presidency, which point towards law as the golden thread of development ? as well as the consequent commitments to deal with tax avoidance and to ensure transparency and responsibility on the part of governments ? are measures that indicate the deep ethical roots of these problems, since, as my predecessor Benedict XVI made clear, the present global crisis shows that ethics is not something external to the economy, but is an integral and unavoidable element of economic thought and action. The long-term measures that are designed to ensure an adequate legal framework for all economic actions, as well as the associated urgent measures to resolve the global economic crisis, must be guided by the ethics of truth. This includes, first and foremost, respect for the truth of man, who is not simply an additional economic factor, or a disposable good, but is equipped with a nature and a dignity that cannot be reduced to simple economic calculus. Therefore concern for the fundamental material and spiritual welfare of every human person is the starting-point for every political and economic solution and the ultimate measure of its effectiveness and its ethical validity.

?Integral and unavoidable.? I call attention to those words because as recently as our debate in January, Father Robert Sirico of the Acton Institute was arguing that the free market is a putatively empty space, and that all of the market?s problems result from the failure of particular economic actors to bring an adequate ethical framework with them into that value-free market. In other words, for Sirico, ethics are extrinsic and, as the behavior of far too many economic actors, quite avoidable. The pope, on the contrary, insists that ethics must be built into our economic and political systems, that those systems must reflect the need for solidarity as well as freedom, and for the sustenance of all not just the profit of the few. This, again, must be intrinsic.

The pope continued:

Moreover, the goal of economics and politics is to serve humanity, beginning with the poorest and most vulnerable wherever they may be, even in their mothers' wombs. Every economic and political theory or action must set about providing each inhabitant of the planet with the minimum wherewithal to live in dignity and freedom, with the possibility of supporting a family, educating children, praising God and developing one's own human potential. This is the main thing; in the absence of such a vision, all economic activity is meaningless. In this sense, the various grave economic and political challenges facing today's world require a courageous

change of attitude that will restore to the end (the human person) and to the means (economics and politics) their proper place. Money and other political and economic means must serve, not rule, bearing in mind that, in a seemingly paradoxical way, free and disinterested solidarity is the key to the smooth functioning of the global economy.

This is pretty straightforward, no? It is classic Catholic social teaching, here stated with a little more directness, even in this diplomatic letter, than we are used to, which makes it all the more refreshing.

And all the more difficult to dismiss. Yet, I read in this morning?s Washington Post [2]that several members of Congress are speaking out about the need to amend the immigration reform law to deny immigrants access to the benefits of the Affordable Care Act. Huh? Actually, the immigration reform bill does not alter the availability or denial of such benefits one iota, but evidently the charge does not have to be true to catch some wind. But, the Republicans are going further. In addition to denying immigrants access to any federal subsidies to help them buy insurance until after the current five year waiting period, they do want the mandate to purchase insurance to apply. So, poor immigrants are required to get insurance but denied the subsidies the rest of us get. And, if they don?t get the insurance, voila, they are in violation of the law and subject to deportation. You see the picture, yes? This is another stab at ?self-deportation? and should be called out as such.

There is not a doubt in my mind who should do the calling out: The bishops of the Catholic Church should be front and center in this debate. This is not a matter of debating prudential judgment. This is about confronting mean-spiritedness and the denial of human dignity. Will we hear them speak to this immediate and pressing issue during the Fortnight that begins this week? Indeed, why is immigration not one of the central focuses of this Fortnight? If the bishops wish to be perceived as other than adjuncts of congressional Republicans, they need to get noisy, very noisy, about these draconian positions that so completely, and obviously, conflict with the vision being set forth so clearly by this Holy Father and, indeed, set forth by all of his predecessors. This is not a tough call. There is a viciousness abroad on the right that was not there when I was growing up. It was on full display at the Faith and Freedom conference this weekend. The Catholic Church may find itself in agreement with modern conservatism on this point or that, but we should be very wary of becoming close with people whose worldview is so mean and vicious, whose concern for the poor is so lacking.

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