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+Gomez's "Immigration and the Next America"

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 10, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Archbishop Jose Gomez has published a small volume with our friends at Our Sunday Visitor entitled, ?Immigration and the Next America: Renewing the Soul of Our Nation.? The book is timely as the debate on immigration moves from the Senate to the House. Indeed, later today, Speaker John Boehner, will convoke a meeting of the House GOP caucus to discuss the issue. I hope Boehner and his fellow Catholic members will read this book by Archbishop Gomez as it could usefully inform their discussion. Readers who cannot find the book in their local, independent bookstore, can purchase it by clicking here [1].

The most striking thing about the book is that it is so obviously the work of a pastor, and specifically a pastor who, as Pope Francis likes to say, has acquired ?the smell of the sheep.? This pastoral sensibility is especially refreshing to those of us who live down the street from Baltimore. Gomez does not pretend to be a constitutional scholar. He does not lapse into the kind of language appropriate for a blogger but not for a bishop. When he invokes a bit of political phraseology drawn from the culture, it is with the aim of exposing it to the light of the Gospel and separating the wheat from the chaff in the debate on immigration.

Indeed, one of the most obvious facts about this book is that Gomez goes out of his way to acknowledge the good faith of those who worry about immigration and who oppose reform. He agrees that no one should break the law, he acknowledges that people are often made fearful in the face of demographic change, and he takes the right of a country to protect its borders seriously. He is never dismissive to those who oppose immigration reform, instead he acknowledges them and their arguments with respect but then, without any of the shrillness that has accompanied so much of the discussion of religious liberty, he shows why he sees these issues differently and why he believes the Gospel and the Church?s teachings call us to see these issues more humanely.

Humanely. It is perhaps the principal theme of the book: Immigrants, with or without papers, are people. ?I think we judge these people [undocumented immigrants] the wrong way,? Gomez writes toward the end of the book. ?We don?t understand what?s driving them?.We need to try thinking as they do ? as mothers and fathers, as husbands and wives, sons and daughters. We have to ask ourselves: What wouldn?t we do to feed the hungry mouths we are responsible for? What wouldn?t we do to be reunited with a loved one? What price wouldn?t we pay? And if the law told you that you could never see your children again, would you obey that law?? These are the questions the members of the GOP House caucus need to ask themselves today. Indeed, they are questions for all Americans.

Gomez?s central theme is that the debate over immigration is a debate about the meaning and future of America. His understanding of the founding is a little too generous as to the religious sensibilities of our founders: They really were mostly Deists, even the professed Christians, and this permitted them, and later generations, to paint the founding as a religious event. It wasn?t. But, it became a religious event because of the requirements of a religious society. When Jefferson wrote of the ?laws of nature and nature?s God,? he was not speaking of the Christian Godhead, but Americans have subsequently understood him to be so doing because that is Who we

mean when we invoke ?nature?s God? and constitutional Originalists notwithstanding, the Declaration and the Constitution belong to us as much as to the founders.

Gomez introduces some bracing quotes into his text, some of which may be new to East Coasters. He quotes California historian Herbert Bolton who called for the study of ?greater America? in the 1930s and wrote this trenchant passage that Gomez includes: ?The study of thirteen English colonies and the United States in isolation has obscured many of the larger factors in their development, and helped to raise up a nation of chauvinists.? Chauvinists! Bolton was doubtlessly anticipating Sean Hannity and the Fox News team, no? Gomez quotes one of my heroes, John Gilmary Shea, who wrote of early Catholic settlers in the Southwest and West of what is now the United States, ?Mass was said to hallow the land and draw down the blessing of heaven before the first step was taken to rear a human habitation. That altar was older than the hearth.? Here it is Gomez who adds the trenchant observation, writing, ?In other words, before any houses were built in America, they were building altars. And those altars were built by Christian émigrés from Mexico.?

The Los Angeles Archbishop is very strong, as he has been previously, in calling on all Americans to re-learn their history, to know that long before the pilgrims set foot on Plymouth Rock, there were Christian settlements in Florida and Texas, that the first Thanksgiving happened in Florida, not Massachusetts, and that the landscape of much of the country still bears the Christian and Catholic focus of the early settlers with our major cities named for articles and heroes of our faith: Santa Fe, San Francisco, Sacramento, Las Cruces. He does not seek to whitewash the ugly moments in American history, but neither does he let that ugliness obscure the promise of that same history: Gomez not only invokes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., he embodies the same principled understanding of the slow, sometimes uncertain, but steady march of justice that is also part of the American story.

Gomez tackles Samuel Huntington?s nativist excursion in his 2005 book ?Who Are We?? countering Huntington?s arguments with the kind of equipoise that befits a pastor of souls:

I would never deny that Mexican and Hispanic culture are different. A continental European perspective shapes the Hispanic sense of law and government, which is definitely different from the Anglo-Saxon ideas of America ?s founders. There is also a different ?sense of life? that comes from Hispanic culture. But Huntington would have us see these cultural differences as evidence of cultural deficiency and inferiority. In this, he makes the mistake we have seen too often in American history ? the mistaking of assuming European white racial superiority. Sad to say that in our immigration debates today, we often hear ideas like Huntington?s being repeated on cable television, talk radio, and Internet blogs, and even by some of our political leaders.

This, and many other passages, show the depths of reading and intellectual engagement Gomez has brought to this book, all of it distilled into a forceful argument that is never gruff, never coarse, challenging not scolding.

I would have tweaked certain sections, to be sure, but only once does Gomez make what I think is a significant misstep, when he indulges the political correctness of the Catholic Right and states, ?As we notice, these principles don?t lead to obvious conclusions on public policy. Immigration is not like the fundamental moral issues of abortion or defense of the family. In these areas, Catholics? moral obligations are clear and unquestionable. By contrast, there is no single authentic ?Catholic position? on immigration.? Huh? This comes on page 92, and the previous 91 pages have persuasively argued that immigration is a fundamental moral issue, and that our moral obligations are clear. (The quotes from Pius XII that Gomez unearthed were new to me and also astounding in their moral clarity!) What is unclear, better to say, open to debate, is how we achieve that moral obligation, and that lack of clarity exists in all political debates, including those over abortion and the defense of the family. In all cases, the clarity of a moral principle does not necessarily translate into a neat public policy, at least not one that is free from political backlash, or one that avoids the pitfalls of the Volstead Act, or one that can survive a constitutional challenge by those who, invoking their version of the American

Dream, discern different values and principles flowing from the text of the Constitution.

Still, one misstep is a small price to pay for an otherwise engaging little book that brings together so much Catholic history in this country, with a deeply, and experientially, rooted understanding of the plight of immigrants, all of it filtered through the teachings of the Church and Gomez?s witness to the Gospel. Pastors should consult this book before preaching, and Catholic book clubs should put it on their list. And, if Speaker Boehner is looking to persuade his caucus, he might consider ordering a couple boxes of Gomez?s book and asking the members to read it. It is morally and intellectually instructive, it treats those on the other side of the issue with respect, and it illustrates well why our broken immigration system must be fixed if America is to be true to her own proudest traditions.

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