

The President, Race & the Church

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 22, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

President Obama's comments in race and the Trayvon Martin case Friday were significant in many regards. It is worth looking in some detail at the more salient points but especially on our response to his call for all Americans to do some "soul-searching."

First, the President dampened expectations regarding federal charges being brought by the Justice Department. This has been one of the battle cries from Rev. Sharpton and his cronies, but it is misplaced. Proving intent is, as we all just witnessed in the trial of George Zimmerman, a very hard thing to do and it is a fool's errand to send the Justice Department off hunting down evidence that this was a hate crime. One of the problems with Rev. Sharpton is that his career has been built on stoking rage, not channeling it productively, and so he gloms on to remedies that are unlikely to serve any purpose and, just so, guarantees more rage when things do not pan out as he had demanded.

Second, the President did point our political and legal systems toward a path that should be taken, re-examining these "stand your ground" laws. I wish to clear up a common misperception that has been fed by our friends at Fox News since the verdict. It is true that Mr. Zimmerman did not invoke Florida's stand your ground law in his defense, but the law was nonetheless a part of the trial because the jury instructions had to point out that Zimmerman had a legal right to stand his ground because of that law. Put differently, the stand your ground law removes the traditional obligation of someone claiming self-defense to have sought to retreat from the confrontation. Mr. Zimmerman had several opportunities to retreat, but was legally protected in his decision not to do so. This is an invitation to more such confrontations. The stand your ground laws, an invention of the gun lobby, should be repealed in all states that have them. They contradict hundreds of years of legal precedent.

The most important part of the speech, however, certainly the most commented upon, was when the President tried to explain to all Americans why black Americans see events like the killing of Trayvon Martin differently, to share his own experiences as a black man feeling the fear of others for no evident reason except his race. President Obama, importantly, did not run away from the statistics on black-on-black crime, but noted that the sources of those statistics are complicated and rooted in, although not excused by, history. Here, the President distinguished himself from too many black intellectuals who do use that history as an excuse rather than as an explanation. But, he also said something that white folk need to hear: Throwing those statistics into the face of people who are trying to seek a more just society only adds fuel to the fire. Among too many conservative pundits, the violence in the inner city is used as a talking point, not encountered as a tragedy. It is revolting and the President was right to call it out.

Not least among the things the President said was how he said it: Without text or teleprompter, the man spoke in full paragraphs from his experience, which usually indicates that he has been thinking about this for a long time. President Obama has not given voice to those thoughts with any frequency, just as his mostly white political advisers will not let him discuss poverty at any length because of how they fear such a discussion would play out politically. At least he was able, on Friday, speaking from his heart and not from words his speech writers

drafted, to finally mention poverty and the relationship it bears to violence.

For me, the best part of the speech was this:

And then, finally, I think it's going to be important for all of us to do some soul-searching. There has been talk about should we convene a conversation on race. I haven't seen that be particularly productive when politicians try to organize conversations. They end up being stilted and politicized, and folks are locked into the positions they already have. On the other hand, in families and churches and workplaces, there's the possibility that people are a little bit more honest, and at least you ask yourself your own questions about, am I wringing as much bias out of myself as I can? Am I judging people as much as I can, based on not the color of their skin, but the content of their character? That would, I think, be an appropriate exercise in the wake of this tragedy.

We are always called to have a "conversation" on this issue or that when there are no apparent solutions in sight, and not just on racial issues. The President rightly noted that when such conversations are led by politicians, they tend to get "stilted and politicized." This is a conversation that should occur in civil society.

It is fair to point out that the President's administration seems less than sensitive, to say the least, to what a vibrant civil society requires. His Department of Justice has not distinguished itself in recognizing the necessary autonomy and integrity of various actors in civil society – cf. the DOJ's brief in *Hosanna-Tabor*. The President, like many on the left, tends to invoke the importance of civil society provided that civil society agrees with them him on all essentials. That is not how civil society works. It includes people with various and opposing views on a host of matters. There is a free market in moralities in this country, a fact that neither the left nor the right much cares for. As John Courtney Murray used to say, however, the First Amendment contains "articles of peace," not articles of faith. I have my problems with the anthropology that historically grounded the First Amendment, and with Murray's attempt to baptize the First Amendment, but my purpose here is only to point out that a man of the left, as the President assuredly is, should be more conscious of the necessary autonomy from government interference of various civil society actors, most notably churches.

It is also fair to point out that the Catholic Church should be taking the lead in answering the President's call to engage in this conversation about race. Also fair to wonder if that will happen. How many years has it been since a black bishop was named in the U.S.? Seven years? Who among the leaders of our Church is prepared to follow in the footsteps of Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle, who desegregated the Catholic schools in the archdiocese of Washington before *Brown v. Board of Education* and who stood with Dr. King on the steps on the Lincoln Memorial in 1963? A large number of Catholic university presidents last week issued a wonderful letter on immigration reform: Will they take up this issue? Will they reach out to historically black colleges and universities to start this conversation? N.B. Better to get the students talking than the academics! The academics tend to cripple the conversation as quickly as the politicians! Will pastors of largely white Catholic churches initiate some kind of inter-faith effort with nearby black churches? Will every bishop in America head next weekend to one or more of the parishes largely populated by black Catholics and ask them how they experienced the Trayvon Martin case, the presidency of Barack Obama, the bankruptcy in Detroit, the violence in the inner city, and how they wrestle with all these issues in light of their Catholic faith? We Catholics in the U.S. have been institution builders. Let us turn those institutions towards the goal the President established, starting a conversation he cannot lead so that the likelihood of future tragedies like the one that unfolded between Mr. Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin will never occur again. As the Catholic Church in the U.S. becomes more and more Latino, it is imperative that we do all we can, as the President said, to wring as much bias out of ourselves as we can.

We all have stories to tell about how we learned about racial difference. We all have had experiences that highlight or minimize those differences. But, if we are only telling those stories to people with the same skin color as ourselves, we are not likely to help wring our biases out of ourselves, nor confront the fear of the other

that is the psychological source of so much hatred in the world. But, if Catholics, who recognize that the common brotherhood of all humankind is rooted in the common Fatherhood of God, if we can't jump start this conversation, who can?

Source URL (retrieved on 06/23/2017 - 15:52): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/president-race-church>