

Thoughts on Fr. Schuller's Tour

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 9, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

Father Helmut Schuller has wrapped up his speaking tour of the United States. The coverage of his talks here at NCR has been somewhat breathless and I am not sure why. Herr Schuller did not, according to the news reports, say anything that has not been said before by others.

When I was a teenager, I came under the happy influence of a priest whom I credit with keeping me in the Church. I played the organ at his church during the summertime and we would engage in conversations about our faith. He was an unreconstructed 60s liberal in both politics and theology. At one of our early conversations, he gave me a copy of Hans Kung's "On Being a Christian" to read and I devoured it. In short, I shared many of the mundane liberal attitudes that Schuller continues to articulate.

In the intervening years, I have largely come to view the Church differently and have either severely qualified my early views or abandoned them. (Unfortunately, my priest friend was killed in a freak train accident and it is one of the great regrets of my life that he has not been able to accompany me on my subsequent intellectual journey.) I came to see that I had developed a penchant for taking ideas and intellectual constructs from the ambient, secular culture and placing them on the Church. As I came to learn more of the Church's theology, and especially its history, I realized how often this habit of mind had, in fact, nearly wrecked the Church. Reforms that last and that help the Church to thrive can be deep, the pruning can be severe, but they are reforms that are rooted within the Church's traditions.

So, when I read that Fr. Schuller wishes to create a "bill of rights" for the laity, I see a misguided, deeply misguided, type of reform being offered. Obviously, our modern conception of rights is completely absent from the Scriptures. As canon law took shape, a pre-modern understanding of rights began to take shape but, like all canon law, within the greater objective of the salvation of souls. Our modern conception of rights was born of the Seraglio of the Enlightenment. The Church, at Vatican II and in various papal pronouncements, came to embrace the idea of human rights as a juridical norm for civil society and in international relations but, even there, the conceptualization of rights is exceedingly complicated. Fr. John Courtney Murray, S.J., as I have noted before, admitted that the Second Vatican Council "skated around" the issue of how the Church can embrace a negative conception of rights of the kind we associate with the First Amendment, a "freedom from," the idea that a right is a personal entitlement unbound from considerations of the good, a private sphere into which no one else, especially the government, can enter.

When Fr. Schuller speaks of the laity having "a right" to the Eucharist, he is not entirely wrong. Without the Eucharist, the Church is like a garden without flowers or vegetables, all stones and dirt, without nourishment. But, no one is entitled to the Eucharist. It is a grace, a gift, from God. Before the Throne of Grace, we stand completely dependent on God's saving action not only because of our sins, but because we can't do on our own what He has done for us. We couldn't even know about it without His intervention. God always takes the initiative. And, by reason of our baptism, we live in Christ and are members of the Church. The language of rights is the language of autonomy but there is nothing autonomous about following Jesus Christ.

Herr Schuller also encouraged his listeners to consider themselves as "citizens" of the Church. If he is arguing

for a more active lay apostolate, who can object? But, the metaphor, again borrowed from the secular culture, distorts. I am a citizen of these United States and I love my country very much. But, I do not love my country the way I love my Church. As a citizen, I am called upon to pay taxes, to obey the law, to vote and otherwise contribute to the civic life of the nation. But, I am not asked, as my Baptism demands, to surrender my life to someone, that is, Someone, else. As a citizen, I am at my best when I am active. As a Catholic, I am at my best when I am first grateful, and my actions must flow from that prior grace or they are not from God, they are willful. As a citizen, I am not subject to anyone except a government based on the consent of the governed. As a baptized Catholic, I am subject to God and to His Church and God governs with or without our consent.

Fr. Schuller also wants to see greater democracy in the Church, another intrusion of modernity into his program of ecclesiastical reform. Setting aside that removing the Church from lay influence was one of the great achievements of the last two hundred years ? something a priest from Austria should know something about (cf. Josephism) ? what would a more democratic Church look like? We all know the methods of modern democracy, the campaigns, the factionalism, the divisiveness. Why would anyone think such things would not come about within the Church?

In Los Angeles, Fr. Schuller said the Church was a "dictatorship." Really? Did I miss the guards at the airport? Herr Schuller may be too young to remember what it was like when Austrians lived under a real dictatorship but he could read about it I am sure. Far be it from me, a blogger, to say there is no place for a bit of hyperbole, but a priest has a different vocation beyond provocation. And, in any event, all of us need to make sure that our metaphors enlighten and do not distort. Calling the Church today a "dictatorship" distorts.

What really appalled me, however, was Herr Schuller's comments about obedience. "Where has obedience got us?" he asked. I thought back to the priest friend of my youth. Once when I said I was thinking of seminary, he admitted that if he had to do it over again, he would not have chosen the priesthood, but having chosen it, he intended to see it through. That was obedience. I thought of Mother Teresa's sisters caring for AIDS patients at a hospice not far from my house. That, too, is done in obedience. I thought of the countless men and women in consecrated life and the many wonderful priests I have known, all of whom took vows of obedience, not just to God as Schuller allows, but to their ecclesiastical superiors. No one has a gun to their head when they take that vow. And, I think of my own life, as I have struggled more and more to think with the mind and heart of the Church, and how that struggle has been blessed along the way the more I accept the call to obedience, the more I surrender my self, my will, my attitudes, and try and embrace the teaching of the Church, the more I allow myself to be taught.

We all need to be taught: That is the great value of tradition, the recognition that we are not in this alone, that very smart men and women have wrestled with all the issues that animate our hearts before, and that some of those men and women walked besides Jesus of Nazareth, witnessed His resurrection, committed His teachings to their progeny, and entrusted His saving work to the Church. None of us has all the answers. But, Fr. Schuller answers seem not only old and stale, they also seem irrelevant these days. At a time when Pope Francis is encouraging the Church to be less self-referential, Herr Schuller's program of reform is very self-referential. Pope Francis is asking us to renew the Church by going out to the peripheries of life and encounter the Lord in the sufferings of the poor: We don't know what, programmatically, this will yield, but we know that if we follow the pope's call, we will encounter Jesus Christ. The Schuller agenda reeks of the kind of clericalization of the laity that the pope, so accurately, said was often a form of complicity between clergy and laity because "it is so much easier." Fr. Schuller's answers are easy for those of us who grew up in the modern West. Easy, but misguided. His program is tired and shopworn, attracting the attention and support of a few hundred people here and there, very few of them young, playing to our cultural prejudices, challenging precisely no one. It is in the words and the deeds of Pope Francis that we find a challenge, and just so, it is in the example of Pope Francis that we get the sense that we are on the road back from Emmaus.

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