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Prof Schneck on Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" Speech

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 23, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Next Tuesday, on the eve of the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.?s ?I Have a Dream? speech, Professor Stephen Schneck will be delivering a lecture commemorating the anniversary. The event is at 5:30 in the Great Room at the Pryzbyla Center on Catholic University?s campus. All are welcome and you can find out more details by clicking here. [1] Full disclosure: Professor Schneck is the director of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies where I serve as a visiting fellow.

Dr. King?s speech stands with Jefferson?s First Inaugural, Lincoln?s Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural, Franklin Roosevelt?s First Inaugural, and John F. Kennedy?s Inaugural, as one of the truly great speeches in American history. You will note that the others listed were all delivered by presidents: King stands alone among non-politicians whose oratory has become iconic for the nation?s political and social life. His words continue to challenge and inspire.

I interviewed Dr. Schneck about his forthcoming talk this week.

Q: You have been preparing for this talk commemorating Dr. King's I Have A Dream speech and I am guessing you have read the text of his speech many times. What most inspires you? Have there been parts of the speech that, with time, stand out in ways they did not at first?

A: Something that?s really impressed me while working with the speech is its profound religiosity. It?s not really political. It?s not about rights or freedom in the usual way of modern politics. At heart, what informs Rev. King is his Christian faith. Listen to the eschatological timbre when he quotes from Isaiah 40 toward the climax of his speech. Social justice for Rev. King is inseparable from salvation.

Q: In preparing for the talk, where did you turn for inspiration beyond the text of the speech itself?

A: Other texts from King were inspiring, such as the ?Letter from a Birmingham Jail.? The magisterial Taylor Branch biography of King offered a deep, historical context for me. Talking with friends and colleagues also helped; it was moving that so many people reached out to share with me as I prepared. I also turned inward. My parents were part of the Christian Family Movement (CFM) at this time. CFM sent a caravan of Catholics in buses from the Midwest to Washington for the March. So family memories of our excitement about the March and my parents? enthusiasm for civil rights came flooding back as I worked on my lecture.

Q: Abp O'Boyle gave the invocation that day but there were some negotiations about his appearance. Tell us a little about that.

A: One of the inner dynamics among the organizers concerned militancy. The always militant Malcolm X refused to come and indeed mocked the March. John Lewis, now a senior Member of Congress but in '63 the very young head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, was one of the more militant organizers who did speak. But Lewis's initially proposed speech, which attacked the Kennedy administration, was far too

strident for Cardinal O'Boyle and some other organizers. +O'Boyle threatened to withdraw unless Lewis toned-down his language. In the end, Lewis did moderate and the Cardinal gave a very poignant invocation.

Q: 50 years on, how much of the Dream has been realized?

A: Progress has been made. Legal segregation is gone. But real inequalities between the races are still evident and appalling. In income, education, employment, health, housing, and just about every other measure of the quality of life, African-Americans and Latinos are worse off -- sometimes shockingly so -- than other Americans. There was talk when Obama was elected about America entering a post-racial era. I love that vision, but the claim that America is now post-racial has proven to be baloney. Look at the very different reaction among races to the Trayvon Martin killing. Look at the racial inequities in everything from traffic stops to the death penalty. Look at the efforts of states like North Carolina to jigger voting requirements in a way that looks suspiciously like the poll tests of Jim Crow. To paraphrase a famous line from Rev. King, it's nowhere near time to put away our marching shoes.

Q: What is the lesson for a freshman in college in 2013 from the speech, from the march, from Dr. King's legacy?

A: I want our freshmen to be inspired. I want them to viscerally feel King's passion for an America that measures up to its own better angels. My hope is that young people hear King's call; that they take up the torch for their own generation, put on their own marching shoes and carry on the cause anew.

Q: If Dr. King were to come back from the dead and you could ask him one question, what would it be?

A: I would ask him to offer a blessing upon our country that he so loved.

Q: Dr. King is one of the few Americans with a national holiday honoring him. Does he deserve such an honor and, if so, why?

A: I've always thought that the holiday should celebrate Rev. King's extraordinary vision for America . My guess is that that would be his preference too. King, the man, did so much to enable the nation to recognize its own long accepted injustices. But, to my mind, it's his still unfinished vision that we should be remembering each January.

Q: Catholics played a big part in the civil rights movement. What is the Church doing today on race relations that is important? Can it do more? What?

A: The Catholic Church is at a watershed moment now, I believe. With Pope Francis the Church is more intently focusing its love and mission on matters of social justice. Race relations, I have no doubt, will be an important aspect of this refocusing. For the Church in America, the bishops have never abandoned their work for racial justice, but that work has been overshadowed in the last decade or so by attention to other issues of public life. How many African-American bishops have been appointed in the last decade? With Latinos now being one-third of all Catholics in the United States, what percentage of priests and bishops are Latino? Are Catholic schools and parishes being opened or closed in African-American and Latino neighborhoods? How loudly is the Church in America speaking out about new laws and court decisions that have the potential to discriminate against people of color? The new pope in Rome has already set the table for reinvigorating the Church's work on matters of racial justice. It's not a question of whether but when that begins to nudge priorities for the Church in the

United States.

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