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Thoughts on Cardinal Oscar's Talk

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 31, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The other day I provided a link to the remarkable speech [1]by Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Madariaga at the University of Dallas. These have been busy days ? and late nights watching the Sox! ? but I have no re-read the text a couple of times and wish to highlight some key passages.

Of course, I was thrilled by the cardinal?s denunciation of clericalism. And this passage caught my eye:

There is no possible reform of the Church without a return to Jesus. The Church only has a future and can only consider herself great by humbly trying to follow Jesus. To discern what constitutes abuse or infidelity within the Church we have no other measure but the Gospel. Many of the traditions established in the Church could lead her to a veritable self-imprisonment. The truth will set us free, humility will give us wings and will open new horizons for us.

This seems to reverberate with something I have tried to put forth in these pages, that the Church starts, always, with the empty tomb and anything we have to say on any given topic must be traceable back to that empty tomb. Otherwise, we are not credible and have nothing to say that the world cannot say for itself.

Naturally, I was especially pleased with the fact that in his treatment of globalization, Cardinal Rodriguez began with this quote from Jean Ziegler?s book *Human Rights and World Democracy*:

The globalization of the exchange of services, capital and patents has led over the past ten years to establish a world dictatorship of finance capital. The small transcontinental oligarchies that hold the financial capital dominate the planet? The lords of financial capital wield over billions of human beings a power of life and death. Through their investment strategies, their stock market speculations, their alliances, they decide day to day who has the right to live on this planet and who is doomed to die.

Cardinal Oscar continued in his own words:

The effects and consequences of the neoliberal dictatorships that rule democracies are not hard to uncover: they invade us with the industry of entertainment, they make us forget about human rights, they convince us that nothing can be done, that there is no possible alternative. To change the system, it would be necessary to destroy the power of the new feudal lords. Chimerical? Utopian?

The Church decidedly bets on living the globalization of mercy and solidarity.

There is some food-for-thought for a Catholic economist! Fr. Sirico? Any thoughts?

But, today I wish to call attention to a different passage, one that at first made me stumble a bit. Cardinal Oscar

said:

The calling of the Church, in the likeness of Jesus, is to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Even Christ himself did not proclaim or preach Himself, but the Kingdom. The Church, as His disciple and His servant, ought to do the same. Her calling is to serve, not to rule: ?Servant of Humanity,? called her Pope Paul VI. She must do this service living in the world, herself a part of the world and in solidarity with it, because ?the world is the only subject that interests God.?

And there the Church, in humble company, helps making life intelligible and dignified, making it a community of equals, without castes or classes; without rich or poor; without impositions or anathemas. Her foremost goal is to care for the penultimate (hunger, housing, clothing, shoes, health, education?) to be then able to care for the ultimate, those problems that rob us of sleep after work (our finiteness, our solitude before death, the meaning of life, pain, and evil?). The answer the Church gives to the ?penultimate? will entitle her to speak about the ?ultimate.? For that reason, the Church must show herself as a Samaritan on earth ?so she can some day partake of the eternal goods.

For this task of mission and testimony, the Church should always come equipped with faith and a spirit of service to humanity. Too many times she gives the impression of having too much certitude and too little doubt, freedom, dissension or dialogue. No more excommunicating the world, then, or trying to solve the world?s problems by returning to authoritarianism, rigidity and moralism, but instead keeping always the message of Jesus as her sole source of inspiration.

Where I stumbled was in the second paragraph, the contrast between the penultimate and the ultimate, specifically the deployment of the word ?foremost.? But, I read it and read it again and realized this was no challenge to what the cardinal had earlier said about putting Christ first, indeed, it was precisely how to follow the model of the Master: We heal the sick, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, because Jesus did these things and those who wish to act in His name must do them too ? ?in full obedience to our Lord, to care for all, without reserve? ? as we sing in the hymn ?The Church of Christ in Every Age.? As Cardinal Oscar explains, it is only when we are credible in treating the penultimate wounds in the flesh of Christ that we can gain credibility in speaking to the spiritual yearnings.

Here I must make a confession. I fear that the reason I stumbled at first over this passage is because, while I am not affluent, I have never been poor. There were months when I wondered about paying the bills, and a few years with no health insurance, but I have never lacked a roof over my head or food on my table. My encounters with abject human need as a young man also were peculiar: Working at a popular restaurant in Dupont Circle in my twenties, I encountered some poor folk of course, but what dominated the life of that neighborhood at that time was the dread affliction AIDS. There was no cure, no treatment back then, so as my spiritual sensibilities developed in facing that health crisis, the ?penultimate? came and went pretty quickly and it was the ?ultimate? that confronted us. I can remember my dear mother saying once that while she came to grapple with death in middle age, when her father and his friends began to die in the natural course of events, in my case, there was nothing natural about seeing one?s friends and one?s staff and one?s customers dying off in the twenties and thirties. This developed a cast of mind and a cast of heart that moves pretty quickly to the ultimate, to the supernatural. But, the cardinal is right. If we are not first doing the work of Jesus, we have no business speaking about Him.

Here, too, I think we see how the example of Pope Francis invites all of us to ponder the electrifying possibilities our Church faces. Yesterday, there were two items about the pope that caught the world?s attention, first, his ranking at #4 on the Forbes magazine ?most powerful? list and the viral video of him being hugged, repeatedly, by a young boy during a prayer service at the Vatican. On CNN last night, Andrew Sullivan scoffed at the idea the pope was powerful, noting that the only thing he had was moral suasion. I would remind Mr.

Sullivan that moral suasion is indeed a powerful force in human affairs. And, I would further suggest that part of the reason Pope Francis? moral suasion has caught the world?s attention is precisely because he has put caring for the poor first in his public ministry.

The images of the pope with the young boy were arresting in every regard. As a wise friend noted last night, it has been a long time since we have been able to see young boy clutching the leg of a cleric and not wincing. We sense - how could we not? ? that Pope Francis is not only holy but healthy. His easy manner with the boy was that of a loving grandfather. No one could look at those pictures and ask a question about ?appropriate touching.? They were beautiful, not the kind of thing you have to ask a lawyer about. Why do we feel this way about Pope Francis? In such a short amount of time? Because he so obviously declines to use the weapons of the world, the wealth and power that Cardinal Oscar denounced in his speech, but instead follows the model of Jesus, living simply, without airs, with as little pomp as he can, kneeling and washing the feet of prisoners, walking into a house in a favela in Rio with all the ease of one who knows what slums are like.

I know some of my conservative friends worry about this pope. I would suggest that his approach to his ministry is bringing fresh wind into the sails of the Church. I loved Cardinal Oscar?s phrase ? ?humility will give us wings.? And, I will note Cardinal Oscar?s warning ? ?*Too many times she gives the impression of having too much certitude and too little doubt, freedom, dissension or dialogue. No more excommunicating the world, then, or trying to solve the world?s problems by returning to authoritarianism, rigidity and moralism, but instead keeping always the message of Jesus as her sole source of inspiration? ?* which is a more elaborate way of saying ?Who am I to judge?? I have never worried less about the Church that I do today. With leaders like Pope Francis and Cardinal Oscar, I think we could be on the cusp of a new and deeper credibility, rooted not only in the words of Jesus but in the work of Jesus. The world is not only hungry, it is hungry for the Gospel. Again, I hear inside my heart the words of the hymn: Then let the servant Church arise, A caring Church that longs to be, A partner in Christ?s sacrifice, and clothed in Christ?s humanity.?

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Links:
[1] http://whispersintheloggia.blogspot.com/2013/10/the-councils-unfinished-business.html