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+Dolan Re-Directs the USCCB

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic
Fall bishops' meeting 2013

Cardinal Timothy Dolan delivered his final presidential address to the USCCB this morning. And, he took the single issue that came to dominate his tenure as president ? religious liberty ? and he re-directed that issue from domestic issues to the issue of religious liberty abroad. It is an artful recalibration.

After listing a series of areas where Christians face persecution, +Dolan said, ?Of course, it?s not just Christians who suffer from religious persecution, but believers of other faiths as well. Much religious persecution is committed by Muslims against other Muslims. Buddhists in Tibet suffer under government torture and repression. In Myanmar, Muslims suffer at the hands of Buddhist mobs. All of us share apprehension over rising anti-Semitism. But there is no escaping the fact that Christians are singled out far more places and far more often.?

+Dolan gave a plug for our NCR colleague John Allen, who has just published a book on the various conflicts where Christians are threatened and persecuted. I wish +Dolan had plugged my biography of Jerry Falwell, which might have helped the USCCB avoid some of the culture war tactics they have embraced the past couple of years.

?Our good experience defending religious freedom here at home shows that, when we turn our minds to an issue, we can put it on the map,? +Dolan says. Hmmm. That is true. Unfortunately the map ended up being written by the ?War on Women? crowd, not by the U.S. bishops.

?Protecting religious freedom will be a central social and political concern of our time, and we American bishops already have made very important contributions to carrying it forward. Now we are being

beckoned ? by history, by our Holy Father, by the force of our own logic and ecclesiology of communion ? to extend these efforts to the dramatic front lines of this battle, where Christians are paying for their fidelity with their lives.?

This talk was not a weltanschauung shift. Instead, +Dolan has given the USCCB a compass to re-direct the focus of religious liberty to those parts of the globe where the stakes are higher than insurance policies. It will be interesting to see if they take it.

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