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How the Morally Pristine Can Cripple the Church

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 19, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The Catholic commentariat is rightly focused on the ?Francis Effect,? the degree to which the enthusiasm for the new pope?s words and gestures translates into a revivified eccesial reality. If the Francis Effect is to be truly felt, this is the kind of thing that must change.

Here is the text of a letter that was sent out to parishes, priests and chancery officials by the Vicar General of the Diocese of Phoenix, Rev. Fred Adamson:

> *Greetings,*

As the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is implemented, there has been an increasing amount of communications regarding the role that local people can or will play in the orchestration of the enrollment of persons in the insurance programs at the individual level. Some of these people, called ?Navigators,? ?In-Person Assisters,? or ?Certified Application Counselors,? have asked various Catholic parishes and agencies to host events allowing them to meet with parishioners and constituents. The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) has published an opinion that is useful for parishes and agencies that might be approached about helping in specific roles to assist consumers in enrolling for health coverage under the ACA. The health care issues are complex and the review of these issues by the NCBC is greatly appreciated.

Bishop Olmsted agrees with the opinion and asks that parishes and Catholic agencies in the Diocese of Phoenix not sponsor, host or assume the roles of Navigator, In-Person Assister, or Certified Application Counselor for the Exchanges because of the implications of these actions for cooperation with evil.

The link to the opinion is below:

http://www.ncbcenter.org/resources/ncbc-cautions-catholics-considering-health-care-navigator-roles

May we continue to pray that an affordable and extensive health care program that respects the rights of conscience will become a reality here in the United States of America.

In Christ,

Fr. Fredrick J. Adamson, V.G.
Moderator of the Curia

I wrote about the National Catholic Bioethics Center?s opinion [1] in this matter previously and nothing I have seen nor heard since has led me to change my thoughts. The NCBC opinion was wrong.

The issue of cooperation with evil is not trivial. I am not an advocate of moral relativism or moral latitudinarianism. But, what the NCBC opinion says, and what Bishop Olmsted is now saying, is that if you work at a Catholic parish or social service agency, and you encounter someone who needs health insurance and, now, under the terms of the Affordable Care Act, might be able to finally acquire such insurance, you should reply, ?I am so sorry, but we can?t help you get basic health care, which the Church considers a human right and an essential prerequisite for human dignity, because we might imperil our moral pristineness.? (I had almost written ?we might fund or facilitate your moral evil.?) There are too many ?mights? in the NCBC opinion. A person might want to get an insurance plan that might cover abortion that might be used to pay for an abortion.

Last week, in an interview with the Boston Globe on the similar situation of compliance with the HHS mandate, Cardinal Sean O?Malley pointed out that, ?closing the [Catholic] institutions down is also an evil for us.? It is this sense of the consequent evil of not participating in the ACA?s implementation by letting our Catholic ministries function as navigators that is utterly missing from the NCBC?s opinion. It is all about our moral rectitude, not about the need to help poor folk get health care.

We should also recall the ?+Levada solution,? to the issue of same-sex partner benefits in San Francisco. The

San Francisco City Council had decided that all agencies that contract with the city government needed to provide same-sex partner benefits. Then-Archbishop Levada understood that the Catholic Church could not do that, but instead of shutting anything down, or taking his toys and going home, he negotiated a brilliant solution. The Church is in favor of the extension of benefits like health care. But, the Church cannot endorse same-sex unions. The solution? Allow any employee of an agency that contracts with the city to name anyone who is legally domiciled with them to receive the benefits. It could be a retired aunt, or a friend who is out of a job, or anyone. Of course, that was a particular situation at a particular time, and the ?+Levada solution? should not be seen as necessarily workable in all places at all times. But, at the heart of that solution was the intuition that we must keep trying to find a way to respect the entirety of our moral concerns, the need to extend benefits and the desire not to have government use benefits to extract a recognition of same-sex unions the Church does not endorse. It was brilliant not because it got us out of a jam. It was brilliant because it balanced the Church?s moral concerns and met them all. And, it was only achieved through what Pope Francis now recommends ? dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

A similar concern was raised on the floor of the USCCB meeting last week when Bishop Gerald Kicanas and Dr. Carolyn Woo gave a presentation on the work of Catholic Relief Services. Here is a link to the video [2]. The CRS presentation begins at 39:00 minutes into the video and the Q-&-A begins at 1:07:00. This summer, some conservative watchdog groups criticized CRS for a lack of moral pristineness and, at the September Administrative Committee meeting of the USCCB, the bishops pushed back hard with a forceful statement defending CRS?s work. At the Q-&-A, Archbishop Sheehan of Santa Fe was first to the microphone and he thanked the Administrative Committee for that statement. At 1:14:50, Archbishop Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas seemed to raise the criticisms again. Bishop Kicanas noted that in international aid work, it is often necessary to work with people who do not share the Church?s views on a range of issues, and that any and all collaboration was limited to projects that did not violate the Church?s moral teachings. But, the key thing +Kicanas noted was that while it was regrettable that many of our partners in providing foreign aid did not share our teachings, that was simply a fact of life. We can?t allow that to paralyze us, to keep us from our clear moral responsibility to help the poor. Let me also give a shout out to Dr. Woo who pushed back against the suggestion, made by Detroit auxiliary Bishop Michael Byrnes (who is misidentified on the video as Bishop Edward Burns, of Juneau), that CRS gets too much of its funding from the government.

Pope Francis has been clear that we should be less worried about making mistakes in our efforts to help the poor. That does not mean pope is a moral relativist, it means that he understands the real world, which is a messy place, and that we Catholics are not called to become like the Amish, self-segregated by our way of life. It is hard to read the NCBC opinion on Navigators for the ACA, or the letter from Fr. Adamson in Phoenix, or the criticisms of CRS and not think of the pope?s admonishment against ?small minded rules.? Indeed, we begin every Mass with the Confiteor in which we beg the mercy of God for our ?opera et omissione,? what we have done and what we have failed to do. Failing to help the poor access health insurance is a sin and there are too many ?mights? in the CNBC opinion to justify their conclusion. The "Francis Effect" still has a long ways to go.

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