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Rescuing the Pro-Life Cause

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 10, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence issued this statement [1] last weekend:

?Many people around the world and in our own nation are mourning the loss of former South African President Nelson Mandela. Indeed there is much to admire in Mandela?s long life and public service, particularly his personal courage and his stalwart defense of human rights.

There is part of President Mandela?s legacy, however, that is not at all praiseworthy, namely his shameful promotion of abortion in South Africa. In 1996 Mandela promoted and signed into law the ?Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Bill? that, according to the New York Times, ?replaced one of the world?s toughest abortion laws with one of the most liberal.?

While we pray for the peaceful repose of President Mandela?s immortal soul and the forgiveness of his sins, we can only regret that his noble defense of human dignity did not include the youngest members of our human family, unborn children.?

The statement is unfortunate in every regard. First, it violates the time honored moral rule *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*. Second, while it is generic in its praise of Mandela?s accomplishments, it is specific in its condemnation of his stance on abortion. (N.B. The USCCB website was similarly generic in its praise for Evangelii Gaudium and specific in its praise for the Supreme Court?s decision to take the Hobby Lobby case. One fears the ?Francis Effect? has not made it to the fifth floor.) Most disturbingly, however, Bishop Tobin?s comments harm the pro-life movement because they make that cause appear to be the sole provenance of wingnuts.

To be clear, I also regret that Nelson Mandela did not extend his great concern for human dignity to the unborn. I hold a similar regret regarding the late Senator Ted Kennedy. But, that regret does not eliminate one?s appreciation for either man?s accomplishments nor should that regret cloud our Catholic understanding of how to react to the death of a revered public figure. Pro-life activists, you will recall, were in a rage that Kennedy was given a public Catholic funeral and accused Cardinal Sean O?Malley of ?spitting on Christ,? for presiding at the funeral.

Bishop Tobin and other pro-lifers do their cause no good when they isolate the issue of abortion from all other human concerns. How much more persuasive is the treatment of abortion delivered by Pope Francis in Evangelii Gaudium. There, the pope linked abortion to other attacks on human dignity and, while he did not use the phrase, suggested that the ?seamless garment? was back. It never should have gone away. Only by seeing the pro-life cause as entailing a variety of concerns can we ever hope to persuade those who, say, agree with the Church on the rights of immigrants, to see the Church? teaching on abortion as coming from the same concern for human dignity that animates our concern for immigrants. Pope Francis certainly has a knack for garnering public attention. Perhaps that will last, perhaps that will fade. But, his approach holds out the possibility that we might actually persuade some people who do not currently share our concern for the unborn to reconsider their

views, while the approach of Bishop Tobin, churlish, grudging, off-key, persuades no one who has not already been persuaded.

It is easy to bash Bishop Tobin. But, I also wish to turn my attention to my friends on the Catholic Left who, at some level, really do oppose abortion but are ambivalent about how to address the issue. They certainly ? and rightly ? do not want to appear censorious as Bishop Tobin is censorious. And, they have enormous compassion for the situation of a woman facing an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy. They correctly understand that the pro-life cause has been shabbily used by the Republican Party and the correctly fret that there is increasingly little room in the Democratic tent for pro-lifers. They understandably think the USCCB got it wrong when it declined to support the final version of the Affordable Care Act because a particular reading of the worst case scenarios concluded the law might, repeat might, result in some federal money going to procure abortion.

So, we mostly talk about other things and, when the issue of abortion is unavoidable, we make excuses for the pro-choice stance of those allied with us on other issues, or we shrug, or we rail against the bishops for the failure to protect born children from rape, in any event, we denude the issue. This must stop.

The Catholic Left must re-engage the issue of abortion with all the seriousness it deserves. We are not wrong to point out that we understand why some people who find late term abortion revolting, do not share our belief that a human person, with a full panopoly of rights, is present from the moment of conception. We are not wrong to sympathize with, and decline to condemn, a rape victim who does not believe she should have to carry the child so conceived to term. We are not wrong to point out that while faith can lead us to certain moral conclusions, we must respect the religious beliefs of those who do not share those moral conclusions and seek to persuade, not condemn, them. If we on the Catholic Left who care, and care deeply, about the tragedy of abortion, if we do not stand up with greater vigor and frequency, we will abandon the issue to the wingnuts. The pro-life cause deserves better. The political Left deserves better. The unborn children deserve better.

It is difficult. Let?s be honest. We don?t want to alienate our friends and, in certain social circles, abortion is not something anyone wants to discuss. Nor is it always appropriate to bring it up as, for example, when a deeply loved person has just died. But, do we on the Catholic Left look for opportunities to raise the issue, sympathetically and seriously, or do we look for strategies to avoid it? There is one practical thing we can all do. I do not normally use this space to make a pitch for money, but *Democrats for Life* [2] is having its year end fundraiser, and if you want to rescue the pro-life cause from rightwing Republicans, make a donation!

It is Advent. If ever a time suggests itself for deep reflection upon the issue of abortion, it is this time. Some accuse us in the pro-life movement of exercising an idolatry of the fetus. I plead guilty. Idolatry is worshipping that which is not God as if it were God. But, in a sense, the Incarnation is a great act of idolatry, perpetrated by God Himself: In taking on human flesh and becoming one with us, Jesus, who was once an unborn child, opened the path to divinization, to eternal communion in the divine love of the Trinity. We are not God, but we should be very mindful of not only our moral, but our doctrinal, obligation to protect those who are made in God?s image. The Incarnation confers a dignity that deserves better than our current laws and better than the misplaced moral censoriousness of the Bishop of Providence.

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[1] http://www.diocesepvd.org/12-08-13-statement-of-bishop-tobin-on-the-death-of-nelson-mandela/
[2] http://www.democratsforlife.org/