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Defending Cardinal Wuerl

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

As an early Christmas present to myself, this morning I should like to defend the honor of my ordinary, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, the Archbishop of Washington, from the vicious attack made upon him by George Neumayr at the *American Spectator*.

I should start by noting that the viciousness of the article is largely mitigated by its stupidity. Being called ugly by a frog is a kind of compliment, no? And, at least Neumayr is not one of those conservative RCs who is burying his head in the sand, arguing that Cardinal Burke's removal from the Congregation for Bishops, and his replacement by Cardinal Wuerl, is no big deal, really the result of Burke's enormous workload. Neumayr recognizes the significance of the switch at Bishops. There his capacity for insight ends.

The opening paragraph of Neumayr's piece gives you the flavor of the rest. He writes:

Donald Wuerl, the cardinal of Washington, D.C., prides himself on his "pastoral" practice of distributing the Holy Eucharist to Democratic pols no matter how many unborn children they vote to kill. Cardinal Raymond Burke, the head of the Vatican's top court, which made him the foremost authority on canon law, has said that Wuerl's practice blatantly violates it.

I am no canonist, but I know enough about canon law to know that the law of the Church itself insists that it exists for the salvation of souls, and all of its provisions must be understood and applied in that light and with that measure: Will this application of the law advance the salvation of this soul? You do not need to put the word pastoral in quotation marks. It is in the law.

Regular readers will know that I am no fan of Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, but I am also pretty sure she has not actually killed anybody, certainly not with a vote. Passing by the irony that the American Spectator seems thoroughly unconcerned about those killed by gun violence, surely they know that the nation's tragic abortion culture is the result of a Supreme Court decision or two more than any vote Ms. Pelosi has ever cast. I am not giving her a free ride. I am conscious of her voting record on life issues and it is a thing to be deplored. But, the Sacrament of the Altar is not a reward for a good voting record or for anything else.

This has been Cardinal Wuerl's position on the issue of denying communion to people. It has been the position of the vast majority of theologians including the current and previous pontiffs. It is even the position held by most canonists. Cardinal Burke's position is the outlier here, not Cardinal Wuerl's. The fact that Cardinal Wuerl and most pastors do not think it their place to deny communion to those who approach the altar is no sign of endorsement of Pelosi's or anybody else's positions on public policy. Cardinal Wuerl does not take 'pride' in this, does he? I have never seen it.

Earlier this year, in his landmark interview with Jesuit journals, the Holy Father said that a pastor should not spiritually interfere in the lives of gay people. Everyone focused on the fact that the pope was talking about gay people, but it was the noun subject of the sentence, not the direct object, that should be attended to: Pastors do not interfere, they accompany, they instruct, they console, they counsel, they occasionally even chastise, but they should not interfere with the spiritual life of another. It is an astounding, and too little understood, point. A pastor is not a judge. He is not a policeman. He certainly is not a District Attorney. He is a pastor.

Not content to attack Cardinal Wuerl, Neumayr also takes a swipe at Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, repeating the rightwing canard that McCarrick 'withheld' a memorandum from then-Cardinal Ratzinger on this issue from his brother bishops in the United States. McCarrick did no such thing. He asked Cardinal Ratzinger for guidance on the issue, and Ratzinger sent him what amounted to the talking points the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had devised for discussing it during ad limina visits. Cardinal Ratzinger did not order McCarrick to share it with anybody. It was not an official document of the CDF, was not presented to the members of the Congregation for discussion, but was, essentially, an internal staff document. And, it was never as clear-cut on this issue as conservatives like to think: it did, in fact, understandably and correctly state that the individual bishop must determine the policy for his own diocese.

No doubt thinking he has sufficiently besmirched the reputation of Cardinals Wuerl and McCarrick, Neumayr then goes after the pope. He writes:

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It was clear from day one that Francis never took canon law all that seriously, seeing it as one of those awful relics of 'rule-bound' pre-Vatican II Catholicism. In fact, he had been violating it down in Buenos Aires long before he washed the feet of a Muslim woman on Holy Thursday days after his pontificate began. (The sycophantic Catholic press said that he had the 'right' to do that as the supreme legislator of canon law while conveniently ignoring that he had done the same as archbishop of Buenos Aires when he enjoyed no such right.) So it makes perfect sense that he would make the antinomian Wuerl one of his chief bishop-makers.

Alas, Mr. Neumayr needs instruction on the difference between a rubric and a canon. And, it was not the

?sycophantic Catholic press? that pointed out the Holy Father is, in fact, the supreme legislator for the Church, it was the Vatican?s official spokesman. And, Cardinal Wuerl is no antinomian!

But, there is a sentence in Neumayr?s screed that really does warrant attention. He writes:

?Pope Francis Catholics? will hit the campaign trail with confidence in 2014 and 2016, quoting his half-baked ?who am I to judge?? musings and pointing to Wuerl's disavowal of canon law.

The phrase ?Pope Francis Catholics? is telling. Some young members of the clergy and seminarians have taken to calling themselves ?Pope Benedict men.? This is very dangerous. All Catholics, at all times, pray for the Holy Father in the canon of the Mass. Priests take a vow of obedience to their bishop who takes a vow of obedience to the Holy Father. And each and every Catholic takes a vow of obedience to the Church in baptism. I understand that, temperamentally, a Catholic may be drawn to Benedict?s style or to Francis?s style, or that the theological density of Benedict attracted a certain kind of intellect while the plainspoken approach of Francis attracts others. But, the idea that clergy are identifying themselves with the previous pontiff, as a way of dissing the current pontiff, is deeply disturbing and the bishops of the Church must address this.

I am sure that Cardinal Wuerl, or Cardinal McCarrick and Pope Francis for that matter, do not need me to defend them. But, if they want to know how some Catholics have entertained kooky, Tea Party-like understandings of Catholic teaching and practice, they have only to consult Mr. Neumayr. I am in no position to speak for Cardinal Wuerl, but I am pretty sure he would say, as I say, that he is proud to be a ?Pope Francis Catholic? just as he was proud to be a ?Pope Benedict Catholic? and a ?Pope John Paul II Catholic? and a ?Pope John Paul I Catholic? and a ?Pope Paul VI Catholic? and a ?Pope John XXIII Catholic? and a ?Pope Pius XII Catholic.? (I can?t say the last because I was not born when Pius died.) If you are a Catholic, you have a relationship with the pope, you pray for him at Mass, and other times I hope, and while certainly there is room for criticism, it must have the flavor of a familial criticism, not a jeremiad.

As my colleague John Allen quotes Cardinal Francis George?s comments on the Holy Father?s discussion of the ?culture of encounter.? Cardinal George said, ?Once you have the relationship, then the ideas make sense. Otherwise, it's a debating society. So you don't start with the idea. You start with a person and relationship. The pope is reminding us of this.? If you start with the person, not the idea, certainly not the law, you are not an antinomian. You are not a laxist. You are a pastor. May the Spirit bless us with many more like Cardinal Wuerl.

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