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Remembering Ambassador Melady

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 8, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Much has been written about Ambassador Thomas Melady and his many accomplishments. More will be written in the days ahead: His accomplishments were many and varied. So, it is not necessary here for me to discuss his academic, political or diplomatic achievements. Instead, I would like to highlight his gift as a storyteller, a gift that is not as valued as it once was but should be.

I had met the ambassador years ago but we only became friends in the last few years through my work at the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies, to which he was deeply committed and where his wonderful wife, Dr. Margaret Melady, is a senior fellow. He wanted us to co-sponsor an event on poverty with the American Jewish Committee and convoked a meeting of both groups at the Institute for World Politics where he kept his office. He was, of course, master of the table, knew all the key players, and had a sense of what would make for a successful event. In choosing whom to feature as speakers, it became obvious that we had only to mention a name and he would make the call, the call would be taken, and the invitation accepted.

About each of the names, he had a short story, a reminiscence, usually about some previous collaboration. I do not recall any particular story but vividly recall that each story indicated why a given person would, or would not, make an appropriate speaker. He paid attention to people, knew who was well-spoken and who cared about the issue of poverty. In Washington, which is increasingly bifurcated along ideological lines, Ambassador Melady saw the world as consisting of friends, some of whom he had already made, others whom he knew he would make in the future. And, he was shrewd about people, a gift I lack, so I always learned much about human nature from those conversations.

Like all good diplomats, he thrived on information, even gossip, but not in the bad sense. I never once heard him relate a story that painted someone in a bad light. But, his stories were telling. Let me share one. In 1997, President Clinton was set to appoint Lindy Boggs as ambassador to the Holy See. The administration, as is typical, made a discrete inquiry as to whether or not the nomination would be viewed favorably at the Vatican. Someone at the Vatican contacted Melady, voicing the concern that a woman who had served several terms in Congress might not have the influence within the administration that would be useful to the Holy See. Melady assured them that not only was Mrs. Boggs exceedingly well regarded, her son was the principal partner at one of D.C.?s most influential law firms. She would not have trouble getting her phone calls taken. In the upshot, shortly after presenting her credentials, Mrs. Boggs was summoned to the office of the Vatican Secretary of State on a matter of some urgency. (Ever discrete, Melady never indicated what the matter was, nor was it essential to the story.) Ambassador Boggs listened to the Cardinal Secretary of State as he laid out the Holy See?s concern. Then, she asked if she could borrow the phone sitting on the desk between them. Within a minute, she had the U.S. Secretary of State on the line and the matter was resolved to the mutual satisfaction of all concerned.

Ambassador Melady liked to recall his early days as an operative for Nelson Rockefeller. I remember him telling me of an event, early in the campaign, at which the organizers were worried the room would not hold all

the people they expected. They moved the event to a larger venue and it was not completely filled when the candidate arrived. The operatives were instructed to never book an event at a venue that was too large: ?Always better to have standing room only than an empty chair.?

One day, the ambassador called and we were talking about nothing in particular. I knew he was from Connecticut and had been told he was from Norwich. I asked him where in Norwich, because the city of 35,000 is home to seven Catholic churches, all of them quite different one from another, and about which I have distinct architectural critiques. ?Well, actually, I was born in Jewett City,? he said. Jewett City is an old mill town east of Norwich which has fallen on tough times. It is gritty, and gritty in the way that you know it was gritty in its heyday too. It also happens to be the town in which my father grew up, so I know it well. It turned out that the ambassador was baptized in the very same font at St. Mary?s Church in which my father was baptized. There are only a thousand people in the world. A few weeks later, I had occasion to be at St. Mary?s for the funeral of my aunt, and I stood at that font and thanked God for the fruitful gifts of grace bestowed there on my Dad and on my friend the ambassador.

Much will be written about Melady?s commitment to civility in politics. He spoke about the issue frequently and wrote about it too. More importantly, he exemplified civility in his own life and modeled it for the rest of us. I cannot imagine him raising his voice. He was inquisitive about ideas and did not care about their provenance, only about their intrinsic worth and practical effect. His lunch table was frequented alike by Democrats and Republicans. He was deeply concerned about the inability of most politicians today to reach across the aisle. A lifelong Republican, and co-chair of Catholics for Romney, in the days after the last election he called to congratulate me, a Democrat, and say that with the election behind us, everyone needed to rally around the president who faced so many challenges. I hated to burst his bubble and tell him that his congratulations were misplaced because I had not voted for Obama. I delighted in telling the Ambassador that I had written in his name on my ballot for the presidency, the first time I voted for a Republican!

When the phone rang, and I saw Ambassador Melady?s name in the little slot on my cell phone that tells you who is calling, I knew to pour a fresh cup of coffee. There was no such thing as a short phone call from the ambassador. He liked to talk politics. He liked to talk about the Church. I like to talk about both topics too. I shall miss those phone calls very, very much.

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon him.

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