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Cardinal O'Malley's Sermon

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 22, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Cardinal Sean O?Malley, OFM Cap, delivered the homily at the annual Pro-Life Vigil Mass last night in his capacity as Chair of the USCCB Committee on Pro-Life Activities. The sermon was splendid, simply splendid, in large part because he preached in his capacity as a successor of the apostles.

This morning, I see that my friend and fellow Church-watcher Rocco Palmo noted [1] that the homily was not interrupted by applause and that the clapping at its end was ?tepid.? *Deo Gratias*. Of course, years ago, Miss Manners decreed that God is the only one permitted to clap in Church, advice that, like all of Miss Manners? counsel, should be followed. But, there is a deeper issue than manners. Sermons are not stump speeches. They should not be filled with applause lines. They should not articulate a list of political developments in the year just passed. They should break open the Word of God and invite the congregation to a deeper appreciation of how that Word can come alive for them and for the Church. This is what Cardinal O?Malley did last night.

Of course, +O?Malley did a lot more too. He began with the Hans Christian Anderson story about the ?Emperor?s New Suit,? which was, you will remember, non-existent. A swindler had convinced the Emperor that this wonderful new suit was magic, that it was invisible to many who were unworthy but that this made it, in fact, the finest suit in the world. The Emperor bought into the lie. +O?Malley pointed out, what always needs pointing out, that the argument for abortion-on-demand is akin to the Emperor?s New Suit ? It is ?a lie, a humbug, a deception,? the cardinal said, and so it is. He noted that our nation?s willingness to ignore the right-to-life contradicts all of our fine words about the importance of human rights, and so it does. And, he noted that just as the crowds who watched the Emperor parade around naked cheered him and complimented his new suit, so, too, in our time, those who do not conform and applaud are considered ?stupid, naïve, obstinate.? In the story, it is a child who finally shouts out, ?But he has nothing on at all!? Cardinal O?Malley concludes this section of his homily by observing, ?The voice of the Church is like the child who declares before the world that the new clothes are a lie, a humbug, a deception. The Church with the candor of a child must call out the uncomfortable truth. Abortion is wrong. Thou shall not kill.?

Cardinal O?Malley preached on the Gospel story of the woman caught in the act of adultery. This was the most powerful part of his sermon. Indeed, it is remarkable that finally, it dawned on someone occupying this pulpit at this Mass to focus on women! He pointed out that, ?The feelings of the woman in the Gospel must be like the young woman caught in a crisis situation of an unwanted pregnancy. She feels overwhelmed, alone, afraid, confused.? He then drew the obvious conclusion from the story for the pro-life movement today. ?We must never allow that woman to perceive the Pro-Life movement as a bunch of angry self righteous Pharisees with stones in their hands, looking down on her and judging her,? +O?Malley implored the congregation. ?We want the woman to experience the merciful love of Christ. Jesus does not condone the woman?s fall, but He does not condemn her. He invites her to make a new start, to know that she is forgiven and loved. Pope Francis urges us to practice ?the art of accompaniment? which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other, in this case, the woman in crisis. This accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian Life. This is precisely what the Sisters of Life, Project Rachel and the Community of Jesus the Living Mercy are doing.?

Another passage of the sermon warrants attention. Cardinal O?Malley noted that, ?The majority of women who succumb to abortion are poor. Poverty is a dehumanizing force that leads people to feel trapped and to make this horrible choice. The Gospel of Life demands that we work for economic justice in our country and in our world. In a society where the rich are getting ever richer and the poor poorer, abortion looms ever larger. Planned Parenthood was founded to eliminate the poor.? You may recall that in advance of the 2012 election, Professor Stephen Schneck appeared on ?The World Over with Raymond Arroyo,? on EWTN. Schneck made the observation that there is an obvious link between poverty and abortion and Arroyo challenged him on that ground. Mr. Arroyo either owes Schneck an apology or he needs to similarly challenge Cardinal O?Malley the next time he hosts him on his show.

There were other strong parts of the sermon. His tale of a lawyer in Cuba who did not want to confess falsifying a will, knowing he would have to make restitution, was very powerful. His reflections on Dr. Barnard Nathanson struck home. The cardinal?s appeal for us, as a pro-life movement, to find ways to celebrate adoption, was a much needed call to attend to a much over-looked part of any effective, Christian response to the scourge of abortion.

I am thrilled that the applause was ?tepid? and wish there had been no applause at all, only prayer and reflection. The holy sacrifice of the Mass should never be debased by turning it into a political rally, something that has happened far too often in the past. Additionally, Cardinal O?Malley?s focus on the plight of women facing an unwanted pregnancy is precisely what is too often missing in the Church?s case to the culture and, without such a focus on and sympathy with the situation of women facing a crisis pregnancy, the pro-life movement is not only unpersuasive, it is actually counter-productive. And, finally, to hear someone in a miter admit that poverty and abortion walk hand-in-hand represents a political challenge to those pro-lifers who also endorse policies that harm the poor, just as it challenges those who champion a robust social safety net to ask how they can support that safety net for everyone except the unborn.

The Church should, like the child in the story of the Emperor?s New Suit, always be willing to shout out the truth. Too often, the truth about abortion has been overlaid with a political agenda and legalese that have not done squat to stop the horror. Last night, instead of preaching the ?culture war,? Cardinal O?Malley preached the Gospel. And, it is that Gospel which will someday, God willing, move the hearts and minds of our fellow countrymen to reconsider the new suit they have been wearing since Roe v. Wade.

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[1] http://whispersintheloggia.blogspot.com/2014/01/the-emperors-new-pope-on-march-eve.html