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Disagreeable MSW This Monday Morn

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 27, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese and E.J. Dionne are two men from whom I have learned a great deal over the years. I first came to know Fr. Reese through his writings, which were enlightening both in their knowledge and their analysis. E.J. I came to know while working at Kramerbooks, which is just around the corner from the Brookings Institution, where E.J. keeps his office. I am in their debt and have been for more than two decades and, happily, both men have become friends. Additionally, Fr. Reese is now my colleague here at *NCR*. So it is dicey this morning to find myself disagreeing with them both!

Fr. Reese's column, "Francis makes his first mistake [1]," suffers, however, from an insensitivity to the culture within which Pope Francis is operating as he tries to initiate reforms. For example, the key rationale for his idea that curial prefects should no longer be made cardinals is this:

> True reform must destroy the papal court and turn it into a civil service. As long as officials in the Curia are made archbishops and cardinals, they will act like princes and nobles rather than servants. They will see themselves as a governing elite between the pope and the bishops rather than as staff to the pope and the college of bishops.

First, I quibble with the verb "destroy," which seems harsh and DeFarge-like. Second, while it is true that making curial officials cardinals gives them an importance that can, and often does, frustrate their sense of service, historically, is it not also the case that these powerful princes of the Church have served as a check on the papal exercise of authority? Our ecclesiastical constitutions give the pope virtually unlimited authority: He is bound only by Scripture and tradition. It is a good idea to provide a check on that authority and to have that check close by.

I certainly support some of the reforms Reese desires; for example, the idea of placing laypeople in decision-making positions within the Church. There is no reason that a layperson could not serve as head of a Vatican congregation, nor that a married couple could not serve jointly as Vatican ambassador to nations with which the Holy See has diplomatic relations. I do not see the connection between this reform and declining to name prefects cardinals. Of course, a layperson named to head a pontifical council or commission might sense that they are lower on the pecking order than a cardinal prefect of, say, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith or the Congregation for Bishops, but I suspect the current incumbents, all of them clergy and some of them cardinals, sense the same thing now. And, in fact, Pope Francis only chose his new curial cardinals from among those prefects who do lead the most important congregations and, in one instance, Cardinal-elect Lorenzo Baldisseri, a man charged with leading the Synod of Bishops and not a more ancient congregation. As we have seen, the pope is placing a great deal of emphasis on synodality, so this is itself a hopeful move.

My biggest difficulty with Reese's argument is that it seems to me if the pope had done as Reese suggests, he would have found himself essentially at war with the Curia. Leadership must be prudent and recognize that changing institutions over the long haul will fail if it is done precipitously, in ways that frustrate the intent, rather than persuade those who resist, any given reform. So, for example, all summer the rumor was floated that Washington's Cardinal Donald Wuerl was going to Rome to lead the Congregation for Education. Cardinal

Zenon Grocholewski, who currently leads that congregation, is almost universally considered incompetent. He is also 74. So to remove him now would humiliate him and earn the Holy Father an enemy deeply plugged into the Polish mafia that John Paul II left sprinkled throughout the Curia. Better to wait until next year when +Grocholewski can retire in the normal course of events. The word for this kind of decision-making is the same word that a Latin American bishop used to describe Pope Francis to me the evening of his election: "astute." If the pope had passed over the four men in the Curia who will become cardinals next month, I suspect that would not be astute.

No proposal, no matter how fine, can ignore the ambient culture. In September 1942, it became clear to Sir Stafford Cripps that he must resign as a member of the British War Cabinet because of his differences of opinion with Prime Minister Winston Churchill about the conduct of the war. The differences were fundamental. But at this same moment, the Eighth Army was preparing an attack on Erwin Rommel's army in the Egyptian desert and, with the United States, Britain was about to launch Operation Torch, the invasion of French North Africa. A crisis in the government in London would be demoralizing to the troops involved in these operations. "These temporary consideration," Cripps wrote to Churchill on Oct. 3, "seem to me to override even the necessity for the changes that I have suggested, and I have therefore decided that it is my duty, in the interest of the successful prosecution of the coming operations, to delay taking any further action as regards my position in the War Cabinet until the operations are at least well launched."

So while I agree with Fr. Reese that further reforms of the Curia are needed, I commend the pope for moving in a measured fashion, taking account of the sensibilities of people who have given their lives to the Church and who could, in the future, provoke a powerful backlash if they are not persuaded to join the reform effort rather than frustrate it.

My issue with E.J. Dionne's essay in this morning's *Washington Post* [2] is of a different nature. I agree entirely that President Barack Obama and the Democrats are well advised to adopt a more populist economic stance, focusing on income inequality and stagnant wages. As Dionne notes, on these issues, a significant majority of Independent voters side with the Democrats rather than the Republicans, so such a course is feasible as well as commendable on the merits.

But Dionne fails to note that many of us were making that argument before the last election and Mr. Obama chose to turn his national nominating convention into a celebration of *Roe* v. *Wade* and his re-election effort a signature battle in a perceived "war on women." To the degree Obama spoke about poverty, income inequality and stagnant wages, it was to paint his opponent as an out-of-touch plutocrat, which had a ring of truth to it to be sure, but which is not the same as laying out a governing vision of policy proposals to address these issues of social justice. Obama should take Dionne's advice, to be sure, but if Obama had run on these issues in 2012, he might have won for himself something of a mandate from the electorate to address them now.

In the event, we are still living, and will be for the rest of the decade, with the fallout from the Democrats' last major political mistake, voting for the Affordable Care Act and then running away from that vote in the 2010 elections. Unless you were in Virginia's Fifth Congressional District, where Congressman Tom Perriello ran precisely by defending that vote, the only thing you heard about the ACA in 2010 came from those who opposed it. The Democrats lost control of the House and, more importantly, of many state legislatures. The consequent redistricting so benefited GOP candidates that, even though Democratic congressional candidates as a group won more than 1 million more votes than their Republican counterparts in 2012, the GOP maintained control of the lower chamber.

The reason for Obama to take Dionne's advice is that the Democrats need to find issues that allow them to chip away at the GOP majority in the House. But so long as Obama is insulting the cultural and moral values of many working-class citizens who support a more populist economic agenda, and as long as both MSNBC and

Fox focus more on the neuralgic issues and less on the economic ones, the Democrats will never cobble together the kind of governing coalition that FDR assembled in the 1930s and that largely drove the policy debate in Washington for five decades. But I am not counting on Obama to dial back the culture wars any more than I am counting on Mike Huckabee to dial back the culture wars. Dionne must find a choir before he can preach to it.

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