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Dear Republican Catholics

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 28, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Here is an open letter to Republican Catholics. Next Tuesday, I will publish a similar letter to Democratic Catholics. Please note the placement of noun and adjective. If you are first and foremost a partisan, there is nothing I can say to you. I am writing to those for whom being a Catholic is the noun, and their partisan affiliation is an adjective, not the other way round.

Dear Republican Catholics,

I write to you from my heart. I believe that the nation?s political life needs a robust conservative movement, just as it needs a robust liberal movement. The different ideas of the one and the other can, should, and must serve to correct the excesses of each other. Wisdom resides in appreciating the insights of those with whom one disagrees. Those liberals who have read Conor Cruise O?Brien?s magnificent biography of Burke, ?The Great Melody? know what I am speaking of here, as do conservatives who have read Arthur Schlesinger Jr.?s ?The Age of Jackson.?

Like classic conservatism, I believe that social ills are often rooted in culture, not politics, and just so are not always amenable to a political solution. Like classic conservatism, I believe tradition is often wiser than the latest fad or, even, the many ?progressive? causes that litter history with a misguided sense of human power. Like classic conservatism, I believe that we should be very, very careful when we adopt policies that uproot traditional cultural norms or appear to challenge the rhythms of nature. Like classic conservatism, I believe that the application of force in the world in sometimes necessary, not only to protect our interests but to champion our values (although, this stance has a noble liberal lineage as well). I especially admired the effort by George W. Bush to introduce ?compassionate conservatism,? but I fear that in our day, that effort?s champion, Michael Gerson, is an increasingly lonely voice on the right. And, while I worry that conservatives have not thought through their legal and political approach to the issue, nonetheless, conservatism?s opposition to abortion-on-demand is a singular instance of cultural and political opposition to dictatorship of relativism that is, undeniably, a cultural, moral and political threat to the common good.

Sadly, it seems to me that these grace notes of admirable conservatism, classic or compassionate, are largely missing from today?s Republican Party. Certainly, Mr. Burke was rolling over in his grave when, in 1980, Ronald Reagan accepted the nomination of the GOP by quoting Thomas Paine: ?We have it in our power to begin the world over again.? The sense of American possibility has never really coincided neatly with classic conservatism but in the Reagan era, the two were forged together. It was also in the 1980s that the Rev. Jerry Falwell brought the language and the logic of fundamentalism into the rhetoric and the cast of mind of the GOP. Also, in the 1980s, the dark side of populism became part of the Republican Party playbook, as Reagan criticized ?welfare queens? and Sen. Jesse Helms used patently racist ads to gain re-election and Lee Atwater introduced the world to Willie Horton. (To his credit, Atwater later apologized for his tactics before his untimely death.) Amidst the storm of ideological confusion, there has emerged one theme as the dominant and unifying theme of the GOP, understandable in terms of the interests the GOP has championed, but completely at odds with the vision of classic conservatism of old. That theme is economic libertarianism.

The heresy of libertarianism has taken root within the Republican Party, and it has done so in the area of our culture where it is most dangerous because most pervasive: economics. I say ?heresy? for two reasons. First, because libertarianism fits with the definition of heresy attributed to Lord Acton, it is a ?truth run amok,? that is, it takes sound ideas about human freedom and responsibility and runs too far with them, ending up in the kind of knee-jerk, anti-government politics that could scarcely be more at odds with the classic view of government as a good found in Catholic social teaching, in the writings of Aquinas and even, with a big qualification, in Augustine. Secondly, and more dangerously, this libertarianism raises issues of theological anthropology of the first order.

Our friends at the website ?RealClearReligion? were kind enough to highlight my recent post taking on William McGurn of the Wall Street Journal. McGurn had sought to clear Congressman Paul Ryan of the charge of dissent from the social magisterium of the Church. (He also tried to clear Ryan of the charge of being a bad Catholic but no one I can think of has made such a charge.) The editors at RCR, as is their habit, chose their own title for my post. They labeled it ?Paul Ryan Rejects the Trinity.? Of course, that was not exactly what I wrote. But, what I did write is that the foundational doctrine of our faith, the Trinity, tells us something about the nature of the God in whose image we humans are made. And what it tells us is that our God, and therefore ourselves, are not atomistic, autonomous individuals in the libertarian mold, but embedded in relationships. For God, we call that relationship love, absolute, unconditional, self-surrendering love. For us humans, stained by sin, we say that we are called to love, called to communion with the Trinitarian God of love, but because of sin, we are often selfish and turn our backs on God. It is good to remember that Ms. Ayn Rand, who inspired young Mr. Ryan to get into politics, believed that selfishness alone was noble and warned her readers that altruism was evil. And, so, when I hear some Republicans invoke words like ?freedom,? words that can contain many meanings, I worry that they mean something different by freedom from what Christians mean. Christ came to set us free from sin, not from our social obligations one to another.

?In philosophy, what comes first is the private search for truth, which then, secondarily, seeks and finds traveling companions. Faith, on the other hand, is first of all a call to community, to unity of mind through the unity of the word. Indeed, its significance is, a priori, an essentially social one: it aims at establishing unity of mind through the unity of the word. Only secondarily will it then open the way for each individual?s private venture in search of truth.? For all their invocations of God, the libertarians are deeply anti-religious if these words just quoted are true. Better to say, these words just quoted articulate a Catholic understanding of religion, not a Protestant one, and not an American one. And those words are, of course, from Joseph Ratzinger in his 1968 book ?An Introduction to Christianity.?

Nowhere is the inability to grasp the social nature of man more obvious than in the reluctance of today?s Republican Party to come to terms with the fact of rising income inequality. Over at Vox Nova, [1] Morning?s Minion has a great article about Catholic teaching on the sin of income inequality, with quotes going back to Pope Pius XI. The willingness of Republicans to trash the very idea that government has an obligation to ensure that its citizens have adequate health care and other basic human needs places them squarely at odds with a different, but equally long, catalogue of explicit papal teachings. As well, when I hear certain Catholic commentators suggest that the right to private property is inviolable, nay, even such that its violation is an intrinsic evil, I wonder if they have read the same encyclicals ? or the same Summa - I have been reading since college. Above all else, Catholic Social Teaching stands for the proposition that all human activities and organizations, including the economy, must be judged in terms of their moral worth. The economy must serve man, not the other way round. And, yet, to hear some Republican Catholics talk, it is hard not to conclude that their view of the market is a superstitious, even idolatrous view, assigning to its invisible and inscrutable workings an ethical value that seems, to them, coincident with a rising GDP. The Master, of course, was clear on this: We will be judged not on the basis of our material success but on how we treat the least of these our brethren.

And, so, I challenge my Republican Catholic friends: Will you bring the Church?s wisdom to bear on the thinking of your party? Will you confront this libertarian sensibility? Will you argue against the proposition, stated so clearly by Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder yesterday - ?Our citizens are a customer. We?re a customer service business? ? when in fact government is not a business, and it is charged with the administration of justice and the building up of the common good, both of which are not so easily understood in terms of a spreadsheet or cost/benefit analysis. Will you demand that your party look at undocumented workers as the human beings they are, and cease with its nefarious caricature of them as somehow less deserving of humane treatment than those of us who happened to be born here. Next week I will challenge my Democratic Catholic friends to do the same for their party but today, as the GOP begins its convention, I challenge my Republican Catholic friends: Will you be a leaven? Or will you find a bit of window dressing to suggest that this anti-Catholic libertarianism is somehow worthy of baptism? It is not so worthy, and it touches on a concern of central importance to Pope Benedict XVI, theological anthropology. Prudential judgment only gets one so far, even in budget discussions.

Paul Ryan seems like a fine young man. I hope he will critically examine the views he has professed in the past and reject them. But, make no mistake about, he is treading on some very dangerous turf, turf with theological implications our Republican Catholic friends need to examine more thoughtfully than I have seen done. I close with this wish: That Catholics in both parties and no party will make sure that they put their faith, and its teachings, at the center of their hearts and minds and let the ideological chips fall where they may. I can think of no greater service to the cause of classic conservatism than to combat the libertarianism that has taken root in today?s GOP and no better avenue for that task than the path set down by the Catholic Church social magisterium.

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