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Vignettes and smokers' chats as bishops meet

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 7, 2011

When the U.S. bishops have their annual November meeting in Baltimore, sometimes the most interesting vignettes are discovered away from the large ballroom in which the plenary sessions are held.

Back when the November meetings were held in Washington, there were always a fair number of protesters. Gay rights groups, advocates for the victims of sex abuse, proponents of women?s ordination, all would crowd the sidewalk in front of the Hyatt Hotel near the Capitol. This year, the only protesters outside the Marriott Hotel in Baltimore Nov. 14-16 were those calling upon Bishop Patrick Zurek to engage in mediation with Fr. Frank Pavone, who led the pro-life group ?Priests for Life? until Zurek, unsatisfied with Pavone?s accounting of funds, called him back to the Amarillo, Texas, diocese. The protesters carried large signs calling for mediation, interspersed with other large signs showing aborted children. I am not sure why they had the graphic images on display. If there is a more pro-life group than the U.S. bishops I don?t know it.

The last several years, for reasons that are unclear, the American Life League?s Michael Hichborn has installed himself in one of two large chairs at the foot of the escalator that leads up to the ballroom where the bishops meet. He and a friend just sit there all day. They greet a handful of bishops, but seem not to know, or not to care to engage, most of the hierarchs as they pass by on their way to meetings or lunch. Hichborn looks lonely sitting in his high-backed chair, watching the bishops glide by.

The American Life League has engaged in attacks on the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, so it is not surprising that Hichborn does not attend the annual campaign reception on Monday night. But everyone else does. The reception is the best attended event at the conference, with a handful of cardinals and dozens of bishops applauding the recipient of the Cardinal Bernardin Award, scarfing down canapés, and sipping cocktails. One of the highlights of the meetings of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has been catching up with Sante Fe Archbishop Michael Sheehan at the Catholic Campaign for Human Development reception: He is always funny, has a lot of questions about politics, and a few good tales to tell. John Carr, director of the bishops? Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development, presides over the gathering with all the aplomb of a Georgetown tavern keeper, introducing people, encouraging everyone to get another drink, discussing some intricate policy question.

The other ?must attend? event is the annual University of Notre Dame reception on Sunday night. Held in a rooftop room with expansive views of Baltimore harbor, the Notre Dame reception also attracts a large number of bishops. The year of the controversy over President Barack Obama?s commencement address at the Indiana university, the apostolic nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, was the first to arrive and the last to leave, and he sat himself down at a table in the center of the room so that his presence could not be missed. This year, of course, Sambi had gone to God, and his successor, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, who arrived just days before the bishops? meeting, had gone to dinner with the U.S. cardinals and did not join the Fighting Irish and their friends. Maybe next year.

But, for me, the most interesting gathering is the ?smokers? caucus? that gathers outside the hotel whenever the

bishops break for coffee or lunch. The group seems to get smaller each year, but one of the bishops jokes that he hopes they will soon be joined by whoever is designated to lead the new health care subcommittee. The smokers? caucus recognizes no ideological divisions nor any deference to disparity of rank. The banter is easy, but often enlightening, with the occasional tidbit of ecclesiastical gossip.

I was curious to know what the bishops thought of the current political landscape. I asked every bishop I saw if they had been watching the GOP primary debates. Only one said he had. That is a shame. Those debates have featured some nasty verbal attacks on Latino immigrants, that is to say, attacks on the people who are the future of the Catholic church in this country. In addition to worrying about their institutional conscience rights, the bishops need to start worrying about protecting their own.

This year, the smokers? caucus also provided the single funniest moment of the entire meeting. The director of the bishops? doctrine committee, Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, came out to join the group one lunchtime. Weinandy has recently been embroiled in controversy over the doctrine committee?s censure of a book by St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson. When he lit up his cigarette, one of the bishops present deadpanned, ?Uh-oh. Everyone gets nervous when Fr. Weinandy strikes a match.? Priceless.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog on the *NCR* website, at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic.]

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