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Institute hosts Catholic conversations

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 25, 2011

In my column [1], I have tried to highlight some of the wonderful people who, in different ways and with different charisms, make us proud to be Catholic. From the Franciscan Action Network, to the personal witness of Ambassador Doug Kmiec, to the intellectual endeavors of Pax Romana, the church has some great stories to tell. This month, I want to talk about a project with which I am engaged.

Since the start of the year, I have been a visiting fellow at The Catholic University of America?s Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies. The institute is Catholic University?s on-campus think tank, highlighting and often funding the work of our fellows, and hoping to shape public debate in light of the research we produce and the Catholic values that are at the heart of the university?s intellectual mission. Since Stephen Schneck became the director six years ago, he has ramped up the institute?s profile with conferences and symposia on a range of important issues. In my eight months working there, I have reached one central conclusion: The institute moves a lot of intellectual lumber.

Next month, the institute is hosting a speech by British political philosopher, Phillip Blond, author of *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*. British Prime Minster David Cameron, announcing his ?Big Society? agenda that seeks to remove some of the rough edges of modern capitalist society, has frequently cited Blond?s ideas. Responding to Blond at the institute will be William Galston, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and one of America?s foremost political thinkers, as well as Congressman Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb. At a time when the United Kingdom?s Conservative Party is moving away from the excesses of Thatcherism, and the conservative party in the U.S. is doubling down, this will make for a fascinating discussion.

Also in October, the institute is cosponsoring a three-day conference on Catholic identity in parochial elementary and high schools. That conference will include a presentation by Bishop David O?Connell of Trenton, N.J., who during his tenure at The Catholic University of America focused the entire university on the issue of Catholic identity and now is charged with running 50 Catholic elementary and high schools. His talk alone will be worth the price of admission.

On Oct. 26, the institute is cosponsoring a daylong conference on efforts to combat human trafficking with the Franciscan Action Network. The keynote address will be given by Joy Ngozi Ezeilo, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Trafficking. One panel will feature various advocates on the issue, addressing what can be done, and another panel will feature victims of human trafficking telling their stories. This horrible crime of trafficking in human beings has been gaining increased attention both in secular and religious circles.

On Nov. 1, institute fellow William D?Antonio will be the featured presenter at an event at the National Press

Club, cosponsored by *NCR*. D?Antonio will be presenting findings from his ongoing research into Catholic attitudes, with data from 1987 to the present. This will be the most exhaustive survey of Catholic attitudes on a range of topics. Importantly, D?Antonio?s survey includes a sampling of Latino Catholics, opening a window into their attitudes and opinions. Often, polling outfits do not have a sufficiently large sample of Latino Catholics to assess the data so D?Antonio believes his findings will be especially important for this growing segment of both the Catholic and broader U.S. populations.

Rounding out the semester, the Catholic Association of Latino Leaders will be coming to Catholic University?s campus to cosponsor an event on tuition tax credits. The conference will examine the state of current laws in various states, and help Catholic advocates and the staffs of state Catholic conferences find ways to promote legislation that helps parents afford Catholic schools.

These conferences are the most visible part of what institute does, but for me, the best part of being a visiting fellow is my interaction with the other fellows. Writers lead solitary lives, and it is so refreshing to be back on campus, surrounded by that unique energy that young people bring to intellectual endeavors. The institute has three splendid graduate student fellows who not only ask the most pointed questions on any given topic, they help this computer Luddite navigate the world of technology!

Every semester, there are four or five brown bag lunches to which all the fellows are invited. One of the fellows gives a short presentation on the areas of research he or she is exploring. These lunches cut against the hyperspecialization that has afflicted the modern academy for decades. Additionally, in the age of Google, serendipity is more and more difficult to experience. Search engines are designed to narrow the focus, not enlarge it, and this cast of mind shapes our intellectual outlook in unhealthy ways. Sitting down for lunch with very smart professors who explain their research in areas about which I know absolutely nothing is a profoundly countercultural and intellectually challenging experience.

Too often, discussions of ?Catholic identity? at Catholic colleges and universities are reduced to a defensive posture -- for example, barring pro-choice speakers from campus. But, at the institute, every day I see that there is a positive way to bring our Catholic faith to important intellectual debates. We Catholics have a good tale to tell, and at Catholic University, that tale is being told.

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

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