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Cardinal Francis George

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 19, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago marked his 50th anniversary as a priest. His tenure has been marked by large changes both in the life of the Church and in the life of society. Looking back on that tenure, if I had to sum up why I appreciate the cardinal?s legacy in one sentence, I would say that sometimes there is no substitute for smarts, and Cardinal George is very smart.

I first met Cardinal George when my friend Leon Wieseltier published his first book, Kaddish. Leon had had two public events to mark the occasion, one at Harvard and the other at the 92nd Street Y, but in both instances, the panelists had been fellow Jews. He approached me about having a discussion with non-Jews. I replied, ?For you, dear Leon, we must get a cardinal, and I have just the person.? Phone calls were made, a date and location found, and a few months later, at the University of Chicago, Cardinal George and a host of other brilliant Catholics discussed Leon?s dense, illuminating, fascinating exploration of the origins and significance of Jewish mourning rituals.

I do not remember any particular point that was made, but I remember thinking how Leon?s book dealt with the same issues at the heart of our faith, especially the interplay of the human experience of death as a final thing with our belief in a God who is beyond our sense of finality and, indeed, beyond any sense of finality, who is finality. Yet, of course, Leon?s tradition is suspicious of Messianism and ours not only embraces it but is organized around the belief that the Messiah has come. The issue of the experience of death was shared, and the belief that this experience must be understood and wrestled with in the context of our religious tradition, but those traditions are very different on this point. As you can imagine, the conversation at the event was thrilling. And, I remember thinking one other thing that cold night in Chicago, that Cardinal George was one of only a handful of bishops capable of engaging in such a searching colloquy.

There are many, many people better placed to comment on Cardinal George?s leadership of the local Church in Chicago. But, looking at a distance, I have noticed one thing. It seems about every three or four years, Cardinal George gets into a dust-up with Father Michael Pfleger, the pastor at St. Cecilia?s Church, and every time they seem to work it out. The Church was once deemed a ?perfect society.? In the post-Vatican II era, we more commonly think of the Church as itself a communion, or as the pilgrim people of God. But, the dust-ups and the working it out between the cardinal and Fr. Pfleger suggest a different metaphor, a family. Families that never have a dust-up are unhealthy. Families that do not know how to make up are unhealthy. In the family of faith in Chicago, they are not afraid to have a dust-up and they apparently know how to make-up. That is a sign of health. And maturity.

Sometimes Cardinal George says things that are a bit histrionic. He famously said that he will die in his bed, his successor will die in prison, and his successor will die a martyr in the public square. Really? Does he really think that? Far be it from me, a blogger, to cast the charge of hyperbole at the cardinal?s feet, and I do believe

the Church is facing some rough times in a culture that marches to different drummers, but I don?t think the situation is as grim as all that. Cardinal George, and his successors, need to be more suspicious of the prophets of gloom and doom that over-populate the Catholic academy.

When he was named to Chicago, I procured both of Cardinal George?s doctoral dissertations. His philosophy dissertation, at Tulane, was an examination of the social philosophies of Royce, Mead and Sellers. It was very interesting but highly technical. His theology dissertation, at the Urbanianum, was much more accessible and it dealt with the issue of inculturation and ecclesial communion, relying heavily on the theological anthropology of Pope John Paul II. It is one of those books that is not only heavily underlined and dog-eared, it is one of the few books that never makes it off the desk and back on to the shelf. Yesterday, I picked the following highlights. They are brilliant, the kind of things that I return to again and again for inspiration and insight.

Americans, especially missionaries, who break out of this cultural conditioning and begin to see their native country through the eyes of a truly different people sometimes turn American moralism on America itself. If the United States is not to be a beacon, the universally inclusive ?city on hill,? then it must be a sinkhole, the evil source of global exploitation. Sometimes this judgment is religiously justified as a prophetic stance. Sometimes, in more sociological terms, disillusion calls itself countercultural. Criticisms of institutions and social structures is not, however, countercultural in an anti-authoritarian society such as that of the United States, a country where the mass media lionize dissent. Nor is every social criticism prophetic. The Hebrew prophets, critical though they were, never told their people that they should renounce their past and cease to be Israelites. Rather, the prophets pointed to God and called their people back to their original covenant, to the best in themselves and their history. Modern alienation is not a biblical virtue.

A culture which reduces freedom to individual liberty or justice to collective programs is as evangelically deficient as a culture which reduces truth to the search for technological means to attain arbitrary goals. Even more deficient, however, would be any cultural analysis which diminishes personal responsibility and looks only at abstract structures to explain patterns of action.

To move from historical consciousness to cultural relativism is to betray human intelligence; the move should be, instead, from a sense of history to a more sophisticated sense of what constitutes evidence for any position or theory.

The faith is a leaven in human history, and inculturation therefore assures history?s openness to God?s purposes?. Without a successful inculturation of the faith, history risks becoming closed and the religious aspect of life reduced to moralism, sometimes sentimental and sometimes alienating.

The fundamental dialogue of cultures in the last forty years has not been the conversation among traditional cultures in a world ever better connected by mass media; rather, the dominant dialogue has been between all traditional cultures and the modern culture partially created by technological advances such as mass media.

Modern culture, however, seem to foster the dissolution of human community rather than forming and strengthening it. It has no single publicly acknowledged system for integrating, legitimating and evaluating human experience. In fact, the search for such a ?canopy? often pits social radicals and conservatives against modernizers. Modernity is a process playing the role of a world view.

Intercultural dialogue within the communion of faith is part of the process for creating a theology useful for guiding the process of inculturating the faith. An ability to engage in such dialogue from a particular cultural context is itself proof that a theology developed there will be both rooted and open, that is, Catholic.

All who share the faith stand on the same foundation. In dialogue we discover how we all participate in the same mysteries of faith. The limits of dialogue are the limits of shared faith and faith community. But as a result of dialogue, I discover that I need the other believer in order to be myself a believer, in order to ground my own faith. The dialogue in faith means that the other, as other, is now within my own self-consciousness as believer.

The Catholic tradition, including the historical development of its doctrinal teachings, runs through the cultures of all peoples who believe; but the Catholic tradition is, for each people, both their own and also the vehicle in their culture for the presence of other believers who are culturally different.

An evangelized culture is more than human community.

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