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2012: A Look Back

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 31, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

2012 was nothing if not eventful. And, the year seems to be going out on a paradigmatic note with gridlock in Washington as compromise remains elusive regarding the fiscal cliff negotiations. Even if today they find a compromise, it will be a band-aid and the country can expect another showdown in the next two months over raising the debt ceiling and Republican demands that spending be cut.

When I first came to Washington in 1980, one of my first professors was Norm Ornstein. He was a mainstream conservative scholar who later went to work at the American Enterprise Institute, hardly a liberal bastion. Ornstein and Thomas Mann wrote a book last year, ?It?s Even Worse Than It Looks,? that among other arguments, claimed rightly that today?s Republican Party has been overtaken by extreme ideologues more concerned with upholding their no-tax ideology than with governing. And, the book was written before the post-election debacle in which the GOP began by proposing a tax overhaul that was largely reminiscent of that proposed by the man who had just lost the election, and is now finishing with the GOP unwilling to budge on tax cuts for the rich, an issue that was loudly and frequently debated in the election. The GOP had been acting as if the election did not matter one iota. They are rightly being blamed for the mess we are in.

I take no solace in this fact. I am not a Republican, but there are things about the Republican Party I admire and the country needs a thoughtful political voice for conservatism if we are to have a healthy political life. On a range of issues like school choice and adopting common sense limits on abortion, I stand with the GOP. I also believe that the government must find ways to restrain its spending. But, the GOP protests against the cuts in defense spending mandated by sequestration have largely given the lie to the idea that what the Republican Party really cares about is fiscal responsibility.

A key political moment came this summer when the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act. Some conservatives criticized Chief Justice John Roberts for his decision, saying he violated his judicial philosophy to reach the outcome he did, but I find nothing cynical in his decision to recognize that if the Court struck down the signature achievement of an incumbent Democratic President and Congress on the strength of five votes by those justices appointed by Republican president, that result would not be good for the Court or the country. No one is so naïve as to think that politics has not always been a part of the Court?s calculations, but certainly it is vital for the health of our judicial system that it not be seen as a mere extension of the partisan wars in the other two branches. And, apart from the health of the judicial system, there is the health of the millions of Americans who will now be able to afford health care to remember. As someone who did not have health insurance for three of the past ten years as I transitioned from one career to another, I assure you that it is truly scary. I again commend our editors for choosing Chief Justice Roberts as NCR?s ?Person of the Year.? One should not have to agree with everything about a person to recognize their achievements.

For me, the year that closes today was shaped more by the controversial HHS contraception mandate, and the politics surrounding it, than any other issue. The two institutions about which I have cared the most, the

Catholic Church and the Democratic Party, found themselves embroiled in an unnecessary fight which, if it remains unresolved, could poison the nation?s political and religious discourse for years to come. I place full blame for this fight on the President. Whether he thought the rights of our religious institutions should be shelved in order to pursue his goal of universal, free coverage of contraception, or whether he was afraid to alienate women?s groups in an election season, either way, he ignored what seems to me an obvious political reality: It is not his job to pick a fight with any church except for the most extreme causes, and in this case, there were and are a half dozen ways to solve the issue from a policy standpoint. And, the fact that he ran a campaign that seemed like his running mate was Planned Parenthood did not help matters. Many, many lifelong Democrats, who were so proud when Sen. Bob Casey got a prime time speaking slot in the 2008 Democratic National Convention were horrified by this year?s convention, aptly called ?Abortion-palooza? by Melinda Henneberger in the Washington Post. Please, Lord, in the New Year, can we never hear the name Sandra Fluke again!

The fact that this fight led some bishops to say foolish things does not diminish President Obama?s culpability. But, the President?s culpability also does not diminish the responsibility of all the bishops to behave like bishops and not like spokesmen for the GOP. It was embarrassing at times, starting with Archbishop William Lori?s testimony before Congress in which he demonstrated his lack of knowledge of Jewish dietary laws and ending with Bishop Robert Morlino?s absurd comments about the role of prudential judgment in decision-making.

I wish the HHS mandate had not been the thing that had shaped my thinking the most this year. I wish it had been the 50th anniversary of the start of the Second Vatican Council. Here is a chance for all Catholics to put down their various battering rams and re-examine their own pre-suppositions about the Council, to return to the documents that issued from that Council with the kinds of questions that come naturally to the spiritual life: What did I miss the first time? How would others view this differently and what can I learn from them? Is there a deeper meaning here? Sadly, most of the commentary I have seen has been warmed-over rehashing of the more than tired debates between the Catholic left and the Catholic right for the past fifty years. A happy exception to that rule was the paper delivered by Professor Chris Ruddy at a Catholic University symposium this autumn. Ruddy is one of the young, up and coming theologians in whom I place great hope for the future, someone who is not only brilliant, but understands that there are more important things for a theologian to be doing than pushing the envelope, things like providing a theology that helps unite the Church rather than divide it. Vatican II seems to me, fifty years on, to still have boundless treasures that we have only begin to plumb the depths of, depths that are available if we can just get past the sterile left v. right divide long enough to look for those treasures.

On the other hand, the political campaign provoked one of the strongest defenses of Catholic social teaching in memory. When Cong. Paul Ryan tried to defend his budget proposals in terms of Catholic social teaching, he was challenged. The ?Nuns on the Bus? were the most prominent defenders of Catholic social teaching and the authors of the document ?On All of Our Shoulders? were the most thoughtful. They did their Church proud. As I have said before, the political threat the Church faces in the years ahead is not the HHS mandate from the left, but the insidious libertarianism that has infected both political parties. Confronting that, no matter the source, will be an outstanding challenge for the Church in the years ahead and, in the event, the Catholic Church possesses the only coherent intellectual tradition capable of mounting the challenge.

There were some outstanding contributions to scholarship this year. Last week I reviewed Maura Jane Farrelly?s ?Papist Patriots: The Making of an American Catholic Identity.? Msgr. Stephen Rosetti?s ?Why Priests Are Happy? gave us all some much needed good news. Charles Camosy?s ?Peter Singer and Christian Ethics? showed both how an orthodox Catholic theologian can engage a non-Catholic thinker, and why we should do so. My colleague Tom Roberts? ?The Emerging Church: A Community?s Search for Itself? combined all the good news and the bad about recent changes within Catholicism in a highly incisive and readable set of essays that

should make all Catholics think more deeply about the circumstances we face as a Church. Brad Gregory?s ?The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society,? remains the most important book I read all year, exposing the ways that all of us are often unwittingly halfway down the slope of secularization. And, although it seems like longer than one year ago, my own biography of Jerry Falwell was published just last January.

Tomorrow I shall not be posting, but starting on Wednesday, this blog will look at the year ahead and the challenges facing the Church, the Democrats, and the Republicans. If the coming year is anything like the last, it won?t be boring.

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