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2013: The Church

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 2, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

On Oct. 12, 1899, the archbishops of the Catholic church in the United States gathered for their annual meeting. It was the first such meeting since Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Testem benevolentiae*, which had condemned the heresy of "Americanism."

In reply to the encyclical, Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore had written to Rome to assure the pope that no one in America held the doctrines condemned, that they were the fevered imaginings of Europeans hostile to American ways. Archbishop Frederick Katzer of Milwaukee wrote to Rome, suggesting that those who denied the heresy were really Jansenists. Katzer's letter was a direct affront to Gibbons. When the archbishops met, Katzer was not present. Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, one of Gibbons' closest allies, urged a resolution from the archbishops in opposition to Katzer and denying the errors condemned in the encyclical existed. The vote was tied until Gibbons was called upon to cast the tie-breaker. It was his reputation the resolution was designed to defend. Here is how Ireland reported the event: "[Archbishops Riordan, Kain, Christie and I] tried to get a joint protest against the idea of existence of errors. Philadelphia almost joined in but Baltimore [Gibbons] cried 'peace, peace -- death for the sake of peace,' and nothing was effected."

The divisions within the American hierarchy at the turn of the last century had several touchstones, but essentially, the "Americanizers," led by Gibbons and Ireland, took a more favorable view of American ways and the conservatives, led by Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York and the German members of the hierarchy, advocated for greater Catholic separation and withdrawal from the ambient culture. The response to *Testem benevolentiae* may have been the high-water mark of intra-episcopal hostility and it is, I believe, to the lasting credit of Gibbons that he understood it was more important to avoid further antagonisms within the hierarchy than it was to defend his own position and reputation.

I recall this episode because it seems to me that there are again significant divisions within the American hierarchy. We still have a large number of bishops who, like Gibbons, do not view the ambient culture as especially hostile and are determined to find a *modus vivendi* with government and others who may have views that Catholics find dangerous. This group tends to be optimistic, very non-confrontational, placing a high value on dialogue, and prone to resolve the issues in front of them without placing those issues into a broader meta-narrative about culture trends. They are, undoubtedly, more suspicious of some of the secularizing forces in the culture of our day than Gibbons was of the secularizing forces of his day, in part because the forces of secularization are stronger and, sadly, because the bonds that unite Catholics seem more tenuous than they did in Gibbons' time.

There is no real corollary today, however, to the kind of conservative represented by Corrigan and the German bishops. They sought to withdraw from the mainstream culture into a Catholic subculture. Today's conservatives tend to adopt a traditionally Protestant stance towards the culture, the jeremiad, a prophetic denunciation of the forces they see aligned against them. Like the conservatives of Corrigan's time, they strike a defensive posture ill-suited to evangelization, but unlike those earlier conservatives, this defensiveness is worked into a broad meta-narrative of cultural decline and anti-religious hostility, especially among the dominant culture's elites. (To

be sure, the Church has enemies, but most of the West's culture elites are not so much hostile to the Church as indifferent.) Today's conservative bishops' response to these perceived hostile cultural forces is not withdrawal but confrontation.

The division I have outlined is not doctrinal in the least. It consists partly in an intellectual bias but perhaps more so in a psychological one. Some men, including some bishops, are more comfortable entering into a dialogue with people from vastly different intellectual and moral backgrounds. Other bishops, and it pains me to say this, seem to have a pugnacity that is ill-becoming a cleric. That pugnacity has been reinforced by some truly shoddy education and some very poor advice. I have commented on this before, but the American church is very ill-served by the fact that so many of its conservative thinkers come from legal backgrounds. Our adversarial legal culture produces a cast of mind that can be incisive and often creative, but it is a type of incisiveness and creativity that only knows how to operate optimally when engaged in an adversarial relationship. My concern about the educational background of some of our bishops rests in the fact that some of the things they say would have been flunked in a pre-conciliar seminary. Comments about "prudential judgment" made during the election were embarrassing. And someone needs to remind certain bishops that when evaluating questions of material cooperation with evil, you can intend the cooperation you just can't intend the evil. Basic Catholic moral teaching, rooted in Augustine and Aquinas not in some post-conciliar innovations, has been ignored to advance what is essentially a political-legal narrative.

It falls to the leadership of the conference and to the nuncio to set the tone for the coming year as to how the U.S. hierarchy will engage the culture. The Obama administration has affirmed in a court of law that they will soon announce the final rule for the controversial HHS mandate. No one knows what will be in that final rule. But we do know that there are some in the administration who have concluded that it doesn't matter what they do, some bishops will still compare the president to Hitler or suggest it is immoral to vote for the Democrats -- in short, that the administration has no political incentive for reaching an accommodation. It is my hope that the president will have read the concurring opinion in Hosanna-Tabor and will conclude as that opinion concluded that whatever the politics, it is in the best of interests of society to allow religious institutions a high degree of institutional autonomy and integrity. But, whatever he does, it is in the best interests of the church if the bishops look for reasons to make the accommodation work.

It will be up to individual bishops to decide whether or not they wish to close down ministries within their diocese. Bishops already adopt widely different policies on a range of issues, but this will be different. In a short period of time, on a highly publicized issue, some bishops may conclude that they must shut down those ministries that are not exempt from the mandate and other bishops will conclude it is not necessary to do so. If, say, a bishop articulates his decision to shut down ministries is because abiding by the mandate constitutes material cooperation with evil, what will bishops who do not shut down their ministries say? It won't matter if only one or two bishops adopt such a drastic measure, at least not beyond the boundaries of their dioceses, but what if the split is 50-50 or even 70-30. The U.S. hierarchy will be seen to be deeply divided on an issue of clear moral principle. If the USCCB, the USCCB of today not of 20 years ago, were to say that such a drastic step was not necessary, I suspect the vast majority of bishops would put down the politicized talking points and find a way to get past this conundrum. Of course, if the White House does not budge, the agencies currently suing the church have every right to pursue their legal cases. And, the bishops have every right to heap opprobrium on the White House. But, it costs nothing to acknowledge progress. It costs nothing to try and be reasonable.

The HHS mandate will not be the only area where the bishops will engage the culture. The church has every right to oppose proposals for same-sex marriage. But, the leaders of the church must ask themselves whether or not such opposition increasingly looks less like a defense of traditional marriage and more like an attack on gay people. There are other provisions of civil marriage law, such as no-fault divorce, that run counter to church teaching, that "redefine" marriage, and we are not chomping at the bit to have those provisions changed. Here is an issue on which the old-style conservative position commends itself: withdrawal. The Church should

announce that her ministers will no longer have anything to do with the conferral of civil marriage licenses. They will sign no documents. Church marriage ceremonies will be distinct entirely from civil ceremonies. If a couple wants a civil license, let them go to the civil authorities. If they want the sacrament of marriage, defined as the church defines it, they should come to the Church.

I am not arguing for disengagement from the public square, not in the least. But, if the bishops wish to transcend partisan divisions, they need to do a better job making sure that their statements do not lend themselves to a partisan interpretation. One need not look very far in either party to find ways that each falls short of the Kingdom. But, if the only people you listen to are on the right, and the only magazine articles you consult are on the right, and the only TV news programming you watch is Fox, don't be surprised if what you then say leads the people in the pews conclude that you are carrying water for the Republicans. There are arguments the church needs to bring into the public square. We need to defend religious liberty, to be sure, and those who think the issue is somehow a fake one need to spend some time reading the last half century of Supreme Court jurisprudence on the establishment clause. The issue is real. The bishops must continue to advocate for programs that assist the poor, not to the exclusion of alternative approaches, but unafraid to point out that if one party prefers helping the poor through other means, they need to actually disclose what those means are, not just cut current programs and hope for the best. The bishops must engage the issue of immigration reform and be seen to be championing the rights of our Latino brothers and sisters. The bishops need to remind both parties that we do not think entitlement is a bad word, that we Catholics do believe every person, qua person, is entitled to the necessities of life. The Republicans have a hard time getting their head around the idea of being entitled to the necessities, and the Democrats have a hard time getting their head around the idea of being entitled to life. Only the church is consistent when it brings its teachings to the public square.

Most of all, the church's leaders must ask themselves how they are going to pursue the Holy Father's call for a new evangelization. They must start by looking in the mirror. In an article about four seminarians who went on to become bishops, that I linked to the other day, Archbishop George Niederauer recalled attending St. Anthony's Catholic High School where he and the other students were often taught by priests. "They made the life of a priest attractive," Niederauer recalled. "They were happy, effective, smart and approachable. A young man could look at that and think, 'Well, that's a possibility.' " I think he hit on some of the key attributes for an effective evangelizer: happy, effective, smart and approachable. Not divisive. Not surly. Not dismissive and condescending. Not holier-than-thou. Not bitter. Happy, effective, smart and approachable. Note to nuncio: When you assemble the ternas, ask if the candidates can display these characteristics, and not only when surrounded by fellow alumni of the North American College.

The new evangelization requires the church's leaders to actually engage those they seek to evangelize. It requires, too, that we stop reducing the preaching of the Gospel to a congeries of social justice principles or a list of sexual do's and don'ts. We must preach about the person of Jesus Christ who, self-evidently, did not inaugurate world peace nor universal chastity. In the first of his trilogy on Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy Father asked, "What then did Jesus bring? He brought himself." That is who the church brings to the questions of the human heart, not a syllogism but a person, nor a theory, but a relationship. And, the person of Jesus Christ remains the only answer to the one question no scientists, no ethicists, no social workers, and no politicians can answer, the question of eternal life. In our busy, distracted culture, the church must again preach about the eternal. The truth claims of the church must be advanced on the basis of the intransigent historical claims at their root, the event of the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Lord. But, the wondrousness of the salvation preached is only accessible to those who have gone down into the graves inside the human hearts of those they encounter. If the bishops of the Catholic church in the United States wish to restore their authority, they must show themselves to be apostolic, they must become witnesses to the empty tomb like the first apostles. And that is hard to do when one's fists are clenched.

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