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Obama Goes to Planned Parenthood

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 29, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Well, if some of our friends on the right wanted a culture war, they seem to have gotten it. President Barack Obama on Friday became the first president to speak at a Planned Parenthood conference. His speech , which can be found here [1], was presented as some kind of cultural triumph on MSNBC. Rachel Maddow, who is very bright and quite capable of dissecting difficulties in politicians? verbiage, had nothing but praise. Chris Hayes, whose new show precedes Maddow, painted the speech in historical terms - ?first time in its 97-year history? he said.

Let?s look at that verbiage. Let?s look at that history.

Perhaps it is not surprising that President Obama failed to mention the most significant current court case involving women?s health: The trial of Dr. Kermit Gosnell in Philadelphia. The media have been reluctant, at best, to cover the gruesome story. Melinda Henneberger has a great column up at the Washington Post, asking if there are other abortion providers like Gosnell, willing to let a child, who is born alive, struggle for life without trying to save its life. Of course, the Post?s editors couldn?t find room in the print edition of the paper this morning for Henneberger?s column, what with the need to feature so many photos of the after-parties at the White House Correspondents Dinner. But, you can read her column by clicking here [2].

The President, in his speech, employed the kind of phraseology that is common but no less Orwellian for its commonness. ?Forty years after the Supreme Court affirmed a woman?s constitutional right to privacy, including the right to choose, we shouldn?t have to remind people that when it comes to a women?s health, no politician should get to decide what?s best for you.? The phrase ?right to choose? seems to come to a stop too suddenly. It seems to require a direct object, no? As in, ?a right to choose abortion.? Or, the President could have elucidated the choice at issue, as in ?a right to choose to end the life of the unborn child.? Nah. He would not say that. Really, does he think it is an oak tree growing in the womb? Not once in his speech did the President mention the word abortion.

I have told the tale before, but it is useful here too. In the days after Benedict?s resignation, I got a call from a producer at a television talk show. She wanted to know if the cardinals might elect a new pope who would ?take a more liberal position on issues like abortion.? I replied that the Church already has the liberal position on abortion: We stand up for the person who has no voice. Most of the president?s speech focused on not having anyone tell a woman what she can and cannot do. But, of course, our laws tell women ? and men ? that there are lots of things they can?t do with their bodies. They can?t drink too much and get behind the wheel of a car. They can?t take certain drugs that are illegal. They can?t break into their neighbor?s house and steal a television set. Telling people what they can and cannot do is what law is all about. By saying that only the mother has anything to say in the decision to terminate a pregnancy, it is the pro-choice crowd which is denying the interests of the unborn children, half of whom are women too. Actually more than half because, sex selection abortions remain very common in some countries and not unknown here in the U.S. But, you will not hear anyone at a Planned Parenthood conference denouncing sex selection abortions. How could they? If only the expectant mother is allowed to decide the matter, who has the right to ask her for a reason?

This language rigs the game by denying there are two parties to the operation, a mother and a child. I have frequently been critical of pro-life activists who tend to ignore the vulnerability of a woman facing an unintended pregnancy. Shouting ?murder? misses the point that a young, probably poor, woman who suddenly finds herself pregnant does not fit our usual conception of a ?perp? in a murder case. And, Lord knows, we do a lousy job as a culture taking care of poor, young women and making them feel less vulnerable before they consent to sexual relations. But, President Obama?s language is also unhelpful. Suggesting that those of us who are opposed to abortion are nothing but a throwback to the 1950s dismisses serious moral and legal concerns.

The President?s language also marks a departure from the kind of language he employed during his 2008 campaign. Then, he spoke about finding common ground around the goal of reducing the incidence of abortion. Then, he invited pro-life Sen. Bob Casey to address the Democratic National Convention. Of course, if the President was sincere in reaching out to pro-life American, several bishops did not exactly reciprocate. They spoke about him like he was dirt during the controversy over Notre Dame?s inviting him to speak at their graduation ceremony. Then, relying on a tendentious reading of the Affordable Care Act, they opposed a bill that aimed to achieve one of the USCCB?s long-stated goals, universal health care. So, if the President decided that there was no one to dance with, we in the pro-life community need to admit that we played some role in his deciding to find a different dance partner. I am sure it did not take much to push Mr. Obama into the loving embrace of Planned Parenthood, but that does not leave the bishops off the hook entirely.

So, here we are, in a culture war. It is ironic, in a painful way, that the young Mr. Hayes at MSNBC seems to know when Planned Parenthood began, but so little about its founding. Painful, too, that the President seems to lack the full picture: Has he seen the pictures of Planned Parenthood?s foundress, Margaret Sanger, addressing a Klan rally? Did those pictures not raise an eyebrow? Will Rachel Maddow bring her formidable intellect to bear on the question of how liberals, in the 1920s, were so enamored of eugenics and why eugenics was a central, animating principle at the heart of Planned Parenthood? And, what that might mean for the way we discuss the issues today?

In 2008, one of the reasons I voted for Obama was because he seemed open to finding compromise, he suggested he would be tireless in the search for common ground, on these difficult issues. Now, I wonder how long I can remain a Democrat in good conscience. Will the Democratic Party reorganize itself around lifestyle issues? Will the Democrats abandon their commitment to the working class, where people speak plainly and without euphemisms, about things like what an abortion is and does? It is easy to despair. But, we are Catholic Christians and so, we must always be prepared to give an account of the hope that is within us. And, there, in the science that Hayes and Maddow and Obama so often like to champion, I discern my hope that our nation will someday rid itself of the moral enormity of abortion: Growing up, walking to school right now outside my

window, is the first generation that will grow up having seen their own sonograms. Those sonograms may not lead the next generation to deny women the right to choose an abortion, at least not right away. But, those sonograms will force our culture to admit the choice that is involved.

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