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Madison Diocese: Back to the Sacristy!

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 13, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Another bishop doesn't get it. This article from the Sheboygan Press [1] reports that the Diocese of Madison, Wisconsin has banned Catholic school children from going on field trips to the Wisconsin institutes for Discovery because the Institutes conduct research into embryonic stem cells. I share the Church's condemnation of such research, but will also admit that it is a difficult and important moral issue. My mother had Parkinson's Disease. But, the decision to ban the field trips misunderstands the nature of education. This ban sends the message that in the face of a complicated and controversial moral issue, run away, run back to the safe confines of the Catholic school. Venture too far beyond the sacristy and you risk losing your faith! This is hogwash.

When the Rev. Jerry Falwell had Senator Ted Kennedy come to Liberty University to give a talk, Falwell faced criticism from his right flank. How could he allow a liberal champion to speak at the fundamentalist school? Falwell rightly replied that neither the church nor the school was doing its job if "one liberal pied piper" could shake the students from their views. "If, on the other hand, we have done our job then guest lecturers of any persuasion will only sharpen the defensive skills of our students." There are times, in the face of a dominant culture that is insensitive to moral issues, that defensive skills must be taught, although I think encouraging students to explore, to test their reasoning, and to engage in vigorous debate, these are also worthy educational goals. Still, Falwell understood something that, apparently, Bishop Morlino of Madison does not: You have to engage the culture. I would add that Pope Francis has been urging the Church to get out of the sacristy and into the world too, and while he has not explicitly encouraged anyone to go to the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery, I do not fancy he would be afraid to bring students he was teaching there. (I am told he was a great teacher back in the day!) But, it appears that some American bishops are having a tough time getting with the new program.

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[1] http://www.sheboyganpress.com/viewart/20130908/SHE0101/309080290/Madison-diocese-bans-school-trips-research-center