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Vatican



Pope Francis greets Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, during a private meeting Oct. 9 at the Vatican. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)



by Michael Sean Winters

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I am not sure which is worse, the fact that Capuchin Fr. Tom Weinandy, a former director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine, could pen such a ridiculously presumptuous letter to the pope, or that the current leadership of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops could respond in such a thoroughly inadequate way.

Mgsr. John Strynkowski, Weinandy's predecessor at the doctrinal committee, has already published a striking response to Weinandy's letter, with a point-by-point rebuttal. I need not repeat Strynkowski's arguments and I most definitely wish to associate myself with them.

Still, I have some other concerns. Weinandy did not merely object to this or that thing Pope Francis has said or done; the whole tone of his letter, his choice of words, showed a lack of respect and humility that was appalling.

For example, after citing "confusion" about the interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia*, Weinandy writes, "To teach with such a seemingly intentional lack of clarity inevitably risks sinning against the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. The Holy Spirit is given to the Church, and particularly to yourself, to dispel error, not to foster it. ... Yet you seem to censor and even mock those who interpret Chapter 8 of 'Amoris Laetitia' in accord with Church tradition as Pharisaic stone-throwers who embody a merciless rigorism. This kind of calumny is alien to the nature of the Petrine ministry. Some of your advisors regrettably seem to engage in similar actions. Such behavior gives the impression that your views cannot survive theological scrutiny, and so must be sustained by 'ad hominem' arguments."

Look at the words: "sinning against the Holy Spirit," "you seem to censor," "to foster [error]," "calumny," " 'ad hominem' arguments."

First, it is more than a little ironic to see Weinandy concerned about censorship, no? This is the man who repeatedly censored upstanding theologians when he worked at the U.S. bishops' conference.

Second, sinning against the Holy Spirit is a pretty grave charge to level against anyone, still less the pope. Same for fostering "error" and committing calumny.

These are the kinds of things that presumably would get one fired. And I do not recall the pope ever putting forward an ad hominem argument, still less one that would indicate the pope fears "theological scrutiny." It seems to me the pope has allowed plenty of theological scrutiny of his teachings.

Weinandy writes, "Faithful Catholics can only be disconcerted by your choice of some bishops, men who seem not merely open to those who hold views counter to Christian belief but who support and even defend them."

Quick translation: Pope Francis is not naming my friends as bishops. C'mon, Father: Name names. Don't be a coward. Francis chose Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl to serve on the Congregation for Bishops. Do you mean to suggest Wuerl is supporting and defending those who hold such views? Francis named your fellow Capuchin, Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, to serve on his Council of Cardinals. Did you have O'Malley in mind? The pope has chosen Cardinal Kevin Farrell to serve at the Vatican and Cardinal Blase Cupich as archbishop of Chicago and Cardinal Joe Tobin as archbishop of Newark, New Jersey. Are they coddling heretics?

Weinandy goes on to accuse the pope of resenting criticism from the bishops. "Many [bishops] fear that if they speak their mind, they will be marginalized or worse."

Again, this is ironic coming from Weinandy, who was only too willing to try to marginalize theologians, but let me take a different response to this observation. If any bishop looks at what this obviously good pastor is trying to do in the church, and finds himself filled with fear, I hope he is marginalized. I wish these supposedly many complainers would just pack up and go home.

Weinandy and his ilk fret about all those faithful Catholics who are scandalized by Francis. Bosh. Francis is probably the most popular pope in history, maybe not at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, but in most areas where loyal Catholics warm to the pope's refreshing pleas for more mercy and less judgment. Most conservative Catholics love this pope. There are opponents, to be sure, and they are well-funded and very noisy, but they are a sliver of the population.

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The people who are distressed by Francis, and Weinandy will be their champion for a while, are unfortunately overrepresented among the clergy and in powerful Catholic

institutions. They, like him, thought they owned the interpretation of Christian doctrine. I wrote about one such aspiring theologian early last week. They act like a spoiled child who has had his toys taken away from him. They are the ones filled with resentment and spreading calumny. They are the ones causing confusion.

When some Catholic theologians in the past have disagreed with a teaching of the church, they did not say Pope John Paul II was "sinning against the Holy Spirit." They said they thought he was wrong. The hyperventilation among the American opponents of the pope, and they are mostly Americans, is as remarkable as their hubris.

I cannot neglect to mention Weinandy's explanation of how he came to his decision to write to the pope. He demanded a sign from God and he got it. There are a few scriptural accounts, with which I suppose Weinandy is familiar, that warn against asking for such a sign. Meribah come to mind? The temptation in the desert?

That whole story about meeting an old friend who said the very words Weinandy had asked for the night before, that is pure, superstitious claptrap. And it is shocking that such superstition is coming out of the heart of someone once entrusted, for nine long years, with analyzing doctrine for the U.S. bishops.

Which brings us to Galveston-Houston Cardinal Daniel DiNardo's response to the Weinandy letter. DiNardo, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, stated that the Weinandy letter, as well as his resignation as a consultant to the conference, "gives us an opportunity to reflect on the nature of dialogue within the Church. Throughout the history of the Church, ministers, theologians and the laity all have debated and have held personal opinions on a variety of theological and pastoral issues."

I do not seem to recall such a call to reflection after the U.S. bishops' conference, under Weinandy's auspices, attacked St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson or other theologians. I do not recall anodyne, "throughout history" language being employed when Fr. Charles Curran was booted from the Catholic University of America in 1986. And, more recently, I do not recall the bishops inviting much in the way of debate when it came to religious liberty. The hypocrisy is stunning.

DiNardo states:

> As Bishops, we recognize the need for honest and humble discussions around theological and pastoral issues. We must always keep in mind St. Ignatius of Loyola's "presupposition" to his Spiritual Exercises: "... that it should be presumed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor's statement than to condemn it." This presupposition should be afforded all the more to the teaching of Our Holy Father.

Phew. At least we are still supposed to give the pope the benefit of the doubt. Not once does DiNardo distinguish between Weinandy's malicious ranting and the Holy Father's magisterial teaching. Indeed, the word *magisterium* does not appear even once in the statement. A Jewish friend, upon reading DiNardo's statement, observed, "I thought your church was hierarchical."

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Don't get me wrong. I am all for civility and dialogue. But such calls were not forthcoming when this crowd thought they controlled the interpretation of dialogue, when they had the back channels to the pope. They were only too quick to castigate and marginalize those who questioned something John Paul II said.

And one has the suspicion that if there were a new pope tomorrow, one more to their liking, the calls to civility would end, the dialogue would cease, and someone very much like Weinandy would be back to cheerfully censoring theologians.

Finally, because Weinandy chose to disclose the manner in which he sought a sign from the Lord, it is incumbent upon the bishops' conference to distance itself from that crackpot superstition. Or are we to expect that, instead of holding a vote for a new chair of the doctrinal committee, as they plan to do in Baltimore week after next, DiNardo will kill a chicken and see which nominee the blood flows toward?

We live in interesting times. When the bishops meet, they should scrap their agenda and have a long discussion about what it means to be loyal to the pope, whether or not his teachings are magisterial, whether their commitment to civil dialogue is permanent or convenient.

Most importantly, they should ask themselves how they helped get the church in the United States to a point where such organized opposition to the pope is so common, where the language used — by one of their former officials — is so disrespectful and ugly, where some of the most influential Catholic organizations and organs are in the hands of Jansenists.

The bishops will not undertake that discussion, not in Baltimore, not anywhere. They will plod along. Rome should take note and scrutinize candidates for the episcopacy in the U.S. even more closely.

And the rest of us, the vast majority of Catholics in the pews? We love the pope and we are with him.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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