Opinion




House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., addresses a news conference April 11 on Capitol Hill in Washington about his announcement he will not seek re-election in November. (CNS photo/Aaron P. Bernstein, Reuters)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Speaker of the House Paul Ryan announced Wednesday that he will retire from Congress at the end of this term. I know that for some Republican Catholics, Ryan was a hero, the kind of young, aspirational figure that John F. Kennedy was for Democratic Catholics. He had a reputation as a wonk, someone who understood policy and wanted to understand it.

When he was chosen by Mitt Romney as the 2012 vice presidential candidate for the GOP, you sensed the shift within Catholicism from blue to red, and grasped that Ryan's personal qualities as a politician who took his religion seriously were a significant accelerant in that shift.

Wrong on all counts. Ryan is leaving public life and leaves behind him nothing but failure.

The most obvious failure is evident in his decision: It is unpleasant and unrewarding to go from being Speaker to being Minority Leader and, looking at the coming midterms, Ryan decided to bow out. A politician's most basic task is to govern in such a way that he or she can communicate a successful campaign message and win reelection. For all his mendacious talk about accomplishing a great deal as Speaker, Ryan knows Congress has accomplished very little that commends itself to the electorate.

It was ironic to hear Ryan mention the word accomplishment. The one thing Congress achieved on his watch was the passage of a massive tax overhaul that was trickle-down economics on steroids. The policy certainly does not cohere with Catholic social teaching as I understand it or as most mainstream Catholic theologians understand it.

What is worse, the tax overhaul does not cohere with what Ryan himself said about applying Catholic social teaching to public policy in his famous 2012 speech at Georgetown University. There he criticized President Barack Obama's policies principally because they grew the federal budget deficit. Ryan said the "overarching threat to our whole society today is the exploding federal debt. The Holy Father, Pope Benedict, has charged that governments, communities, and individuals running up high debt levels are 'living at the expense of future generations' and 'living in

untruth.'"

Yet, the tax overhaul Ryan is so proud of also explodes the debt, and, unlike Obama's deficit spending, Ryan's bill grew the debt at a time of relative prosperity, not when we needed some deficit spending to help pull the country out of the 2008 recession. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) predicts the tax law will add $1.852 trillion to the deficit over the next decade.  So much for the moral imperative of not pushing of our bills onto future generations.

In that same speech, Ryan repeated a canard that became GOP gospel, saying, "Look at the results of the government-centered approach to the war on poverty. One in six Americans are in poverty today — the highest rate in a generation. In this war on poverty, poverty is winning."

But the wonk was manipulating the data. As Danny Vinik demonstrated definitively at Politico, the war on poverty significantly lowered the number of poor people in this country.

One of Ryan's biggest years was 2012. He gave that big speech at Georgetown. He was selected as Romney's running mate. And he saw the light on Ayn Rand. Or did he? "I reject her philosophy," Ryan told Bob Costa, then with the National Review. "It's an atheist philosophy. It reduces human interactions down to mere contracts and it is antithetical to my worldview. If somebody is going to try to paste a person's view on epistemology to me, then give me Thomas Aquinas." In that same interview Ryan tried to dispel the "urban myth" about his reliance upon Rand.

But the Atlas Society, which exists to defend and propagate Rand, released the audio of a talk Ryan gave to them in which he said, "I grew up reading Ayn Rand and it taught me quite a bit about who I am and what my value systems are, and what my beliefs are. It's inspired me so much that it's required reading in my office for all my interns and my staff."

He added, "But the reason I got involved in public service, by and large, if I had to credit one thinker, one person, it would be Ayn Rand." Urban myth, eh?

So, if in 2005, Rand was his inspiration and tutor, and in 2012 it was St. Thomas Aquinas who guided the congressman's intellect, there is an obvious question to be posed and answered:  What policies did Ryan reconsider and change his stance on in light of such a powerful shift from Randian individualism to Thomistic focus on the

common good?

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In his defense, Ryan's party was the subject of a hostile takeover in the past two years, and Ryan himself held out longer than many others in his resistance to Trump.  But, in the end, he caved like the rest. He gets one point for delay, but even that one point I award grudgingly.

He, like other Republican Catholics, helped cultivate the idea that if a politician was correct in opposing abortion, that mattered more than anything else. Ryan, like every other GOP leader, ignored the festering racism within their own ranks. He did not share that racism, I am confident, just as he never believed that abortion was the defining issue of our national politics, but he did nothing to stop those twin deceits from prospering. In fact, he rode them into power.

Finally, Paul Ryan is only 48 years old. In 2024 he will be 54, younger than most candidates for the presidency. There was nothing to stop him from leading the opposition to Donald Trump, receding from public life, and coming back after Trump had destroyed himself.

Instead, he thought he could contain Trump or moderate him. Did he have any reason to think he would be successful in moderating Trump? Or did he simply think he could use Trump to accomplish his own objectives? Or what? We may never know the answers to those questions and now they are academic anyway because they were proven wrong by events.

Ryan slinks off the stage a beaten man, while Trump brings the nation to the brink of a constitutional crisis. And the only legacy achievement to which Ryan can point is a tax overhaul that betrayed his most conspicuous public policy objective, lowering the federal deficit. His career is one of failure, both on its own terms and in terms of helping the country. I hope he enjoys his early retirement. He has earned it.

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

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