Opinion
News



by Michael Sean Winters

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At Religion News Service, Andrew Seidel is half-right and half-wrong in his opposition to the First Amendment Defense Act. He is right that the bill wrongly names only two religious beliefs that it highlights for protection: That marriage is between a man and a woman and that sexual relations outside marriage are improper. This is wrong not only from a legal perspective but even more so from a religion one. Yet again, religion is reduced to conservative sexual ethics. That reduction has not prevented the U.S. bishops' conference from supporting the legislation. But Seidel, who works for the Freedom From Religion Foundation, is wrong that the First Amendment only protects religious thought and not religious action. He may not even realize it, but such a distinction between thought and action is itself a type of favoring one religion over another. Catholicism certainly is not characterized as individualistic, confined to Sunday morning, and with a big bright line between works and faith.

Relatedly, depressing new research from the Public Religion Research Institute shows that young people are increasingly likely to say that they are moving toward a pro-choice stance on abortion. I say "relatedly" because as long as religious leaders reduce religion to conservative sexual ethics, young people are going to

walk away.

A group of concerned faculty, students and alumni have launched a website called "Save the Catholic University of America." The school has been floundering since then-Fr. David O'Connell stepped down and became the bishop of Trenton, New Jersey. Enrollment is down even though they accept virtually anyone who is breathing. Yet, the current provost is making more than O'Connell, a stunning $401,787, a 55 percent increase over the salary of the previous provost. And the president of the university, John Garvey, is making $648,845, a 70 percent increase over O'Connell's salary. The vice president for development's salary has gone up by 143 percent. During the same time period, salaries for faculty and staff have gone up 12 percent. I read this data and said to myself: I do not see how rewarding failure will bring about success.

Meanwhile, across the river, students at George Mason University have filed a lawsuit, seeking to know the precise contours of the relationship between the Koch brothers and the school. This has implications for Catholic University as well, which received a large donation from Charles Koch and then embarrassed itself by lionizing him despite his anti-Catholic libertarianism. Maybe the Catholic University students will get the idea too and sue to find out what strings attached to the money given to the university.

The University of Notre Dame hosted its own little version of a Republican Party Convention this past weekend, bestowing its "prestigious" *Evangelium Vitae medal on Mary Ann Glendon*. The award recognizes her work on behalf of the pro-life cause, work that we can all commend. Still, Glendon behaved badly when she joined the mob attacking Notre Dame for its decision to honor our nation's first black president. More importantly, given the Holy Father's beautiful example of how to apologize when you get it wrong on the subject of clergy sex abuse, what damage is done to the Catholic Church, what scandal given, when an iconic Catholic university honors a person who, so far as I know, has never publicly apologized for her defense of Fr. Marcial Maciel, founder of the Legion of Christ who we know was a serial pedophile. Her appearance at Notre Dame would have been the perfect opportunity to beg forgiveness for serving as one of Maciel's defenders, seeing as defending children is the heart of *Evangelium Vitae*. And, lest we forget, her defense of Maciel was not just wrong, it was gushing: "The recent revival of long discredited allegations against Father Maciel would come as a surprise were it not for the fact that the U.S. is currently experiencing a resurgence of anti-Catholicism,"

Glendon said in 1997. One would have thought that Fr.
Richard Neuhaus's meticulous analysis of the evidence in First Things had put the matter to rest once and for all. "As one who sat near Father Maciel for several weeks during the Synod for America, I simply cannot reconcile those old stories with the man's radiant holiness," Glendon said. When you see that much sugar-coating going on, even a Harvard professor must have enough of a clue that something is rotten underneath.

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At the Working-Class Perspectives blog, Kathy Newman examines the return of the TV show "Roseanne" to primetime, confronting both the encomiums and the condemnations. I wish to make her final words my own:

> *My final thought after watching Roseanne concerns the Democrats, rather than the Republicans. As long as the Democratic Party gets its money and its policies from the 1%, it will never be a party of the working-class, immigrant, black, brown, and other marginalized peoples represented, at least partially, by the Connors. The Democrats need a heartland strategy, or, at the very least, a heart, to radically change the laws, tax codes and policies that have created the greatest levels of inequality and poverty in American history. Now that's a program I would definitely watch.*

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

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