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A man passes by a boarded-up restaurant in New York City April 29 with a sign suggesting it will reopen for business once it's safe in the coronavirus pandemic climate. (CNS/Reuters/Brendan McDermid)



by Michael Sean Winters

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> Data are coming in, and their import is clear. The coronavirus pandemic is not and never was a threat to society. COVID-19 poses a danger to the elderly and the medically compromised. Otherwise, for most who present symptoms, it can be nasty and persistent, but is not life-threatening.

With those chilling words, devoid of empathy, R.R. Reno, the editor of First Things, began a strange essay in which he continued his bizarre fascination with the proposition that the coronavirus is not such a big deal. He penned those words as the official death rate in the United States went over 50,000 souls lost to the virus, an estimate that is widely considered low. In seeking to give Catholic cover to the libertarian mobs assaulting state capitols across the land, demanding the government reopen the economy no matter the consequences to public health, Reno has gone off the rails.

I think we can offer a moral assessment of Reno's column by applying a few tweaks to his own words:

> Data are coming in, and their import is clear. First Things is not and never was a threat to society. First Things poses a danger to the impressionable and the theologically compromised. Otherwise, for most who present symptoms of neoliberalism, it can be nasty and persistent, but is not life-threatening, at least not for them.

It has long been obvious that the people at First Things, editor Reno most prominent among them, operate from a different worldview from the one that animates me. Now, methinks we live on separate planets.

Reno writes that the coronavirus is "a disease that, as far as we can tell at this point, is not significantly more fatal than the flu." Does anyone recall refrigerated trucks standing outside hospitals last year during flu season, needed as makeshift

morgues? According to The New York Times, the mortality rate in New York City, where the First Things office is located, between March 11 and April 25 was 309% above normal. How high would it have to get for Reno to be alarmed?

He blames "our incontinent and irresponsible media" for the sense of societal concern and the draconian measures that have been used to contain the virus, but every public health expert has pointed to the necessity of these measures, except the few cranks Laura Ingraham ferrets out to spread misinformation on her television show.

On Sept. 11, 2001, terrorists killed some 3,000 people in New York City and our nation responded with a war that is still ongoing, actually two of them. Of course, with the advent of the all-volunteer army, the children of the upper middle classes do not need to go to war on behalf of the nation and those who didn't were told the best thing we could do was stimulate the economy by going shopping. More than 4,000 American soldiers have been killed in Iraq and close to 2,500 American soldiers have perished in Afghanistan. The civilian death counts are widely disputed but none are lower than 100,000 and some are closer to half a million.

In 2012, an attack on U.S. diplomats in Benghazi killed four people, all of them irreplaceable souls made in the image of God. The Republicans in Congress launched four years' worth of investigations and Princeton professor and Republican Party hack Robert P. George took to the pages of, you guessed it, First Things to demand a more robust response. He thundered:

> Is there no one left in the party of Franklin Roosevelt and Adlai Stevenson, the party of my grandparents and parents — the party to which I myself once gave allegiance — with the integrity and courage to demand answers to the key questions: What did the President know and when he know it?

Is George interested in posing that last question to President Donald Trump and his administration now?

Why are some deaths worth all this effort and others not? Reno does not say.

Never has the consistent ethic of life looked so good. Conservatives always resisted its obvious logic, preferring to focus on abortion as uniquely evil. But prematurely reopening the economy, like ignoring the devastating impact of climate change (another specialty of First Things), may lack the direct intentionality of abortion or

euthanasia or capital punishment, but we are not ignorant of the science, and we know that particular actions and inactions carry certain risks to life. It is becoming a form of moral obscurantism to insist on direct and individual intentionality as a prerequisite to moral outrage. Foreseeable neglect of the dignity of life is a form of gross moral negligence also.

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We Catholics admit there is a hierarchy of values and the protection of human life is at the top of that hierarchy, especially when the arguments opposite are principally about economics. For decades since *Roe* v. *Wade*, one of the weakest arguments for legal abortion has been that women's economic opportunities would be hampered if they did not have the right to an abortion. So, if women want that corner office, better be prepared to not get pregnant, or end a pregnancy — that is, make their situation more closely resemble that of men for whom pregnancy is not a hurdle to professional ambitions.

The obvious moral recourse to the fact of biological difference is to demand that our corporate workplaces accommodate pregnancy and to make it illegal to punish women professionally because they choose to start families. The intentional killing of an unborn child is not just an incommensurate moral response, it is an unjust and anti-feminist response, because it still forces women to adjust, not the corporate culture.

I am reasonably certain that most conservative Catholics would agree, but then I have to ask: Is human life more important than economic hardship only when microeconomic issues are in play? When macroeconomic factors are in play, when the market needs to be overridden by direct government intervention, then must the defense of human life take a back seat?

In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, St. Pope John Paul II wrote:

> Where life is involved, the service of charity must be profoundly consistent. It cannot tolerate bias and discrimination, for human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage and in every situation; it is an indivisible good. We need then to "show care" for all life and for the life of

> everyone. ...
>
> Special attention must be given to the elderly. While in some cultures older people remain a part of the family with an important and active role, in others the elderly are regarded as a useless burden and are left to themselves. ... Neglect of the elderly or their outright rejection are intolerable. ...
>
> In a word, we can say that the cultural change which we are calling for demands from everyone the courage to adopt a new life-style, consisting in making practical choices — at the personal, family, social and international level — on the basis of a correct scale of values: the primacy of being over having, of the person over things.

Do not these all point in a different direction from that Reno wishes to encourage?

Let us take another consistent ethic of life concern: euthanasia. A court decision in the Netherlands made that barbaric practice even more morally fraught than it was previously. Cardinal Willem Eijk of Utrecht predicted that euthanasia will become even more widespread now that the country's highest court has allowed the killing of people with dementia, even if they do not give their consent. Read that again: *even if they do not give their consent*. There is a word for that. Murder.

Further, the cardinal rightly recognized the way this "right to euthanize" will become viewed as a kind of obligation. "Physicians of nursing homes therefore fear that they will be put under pressure by patients with dementia and their relatives to perform euthanasia as a consequence of the Supreme Court's judgment," Eijk said. How is that pressure different from the pressure Reno wants to exert in calling for the economy to reopen before the public health guidelines have been achieved?

The valuing of economic concerns above the defense of human life is not new. In our craven age, the worshipers of the market are so many Israelites clamoring to Aaron: "Up, make us gods who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him" (Exodus 32:1). Now, the obscurantism is not about Moses but about medicine, but it ends up in the same unholy place.

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

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