The Consistent Ethic of Life & Its Critics

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Three articles in the past few days call attention to the consistent ethic of life, what it means and does not mean, and why it is so vitally important at this moment in the life of the Church.

At the National Catholic Register, Fr. Raymond D’Souza explained that while he had no difficulty with the consistent ethic of life as a construct, he worried about its practical consequences in the 1980s, and the thing that really has Father upset is the way Archbishop Blase Cupich is employing the consistent ethic today. D’Souza registers two complaints: First, that the ethic cannot slip into moral equivalence and, second, that +Cupich is not being true to the ethic because he failed to mention abortion at three recent public events.

In +Cupich’s op-ed in the Chicago Tribune, as I read it, he was trying to get people to ask themselves questions about conscience. To those who are outraged at the maltreatment of immigrants, or the endemic poverty that kills millions of children a year, +Cupich asked why they are not outraged by the Planned Parenthood videos. And to those who were outraged by the Planned Parenthood videos, +Cupich asked by why they are not equally outraged by other attacks on human dignity. That is the whole point of the consistent ethic of life, to get people to stretch beyond their partisan, ideological comfort zone and stop burying those pricks of conscience which speak to them. Conscience is the voice of God in our hearts? Newman called conscience ?the aboriginal Vicar of Christ? and it points us towards God?s promises, not to partisan talking points. Sadly, some politicians will use it to, in effect, claim that they are no less hypocritical than the other side, but hopefully some politicians, or at least some voters, will ask themselves why they do not hear the voice of conscience on issues that might cause them to re-think their partisan or ideological biases.

The second complaint, that +Cupich has failed to mention abortion at three recent public events, is simply
bizarre. As for his Boston College commencement address, I thought the archbishop?s repeated references to ?the givenness of life? were pretty clearly an invitation to not consider life something to be thrown away. More specifically, Fr. D?Souza claims +Cupich did not even mention ?the sanctity of life? but fails to note that, among his examples of the kind of leaders he hoped the graduates would become, he did mention human dignity explicitly:

Leaders who enact public policy that pursues human solidarity and dignity for all, and who are unafraid to challenge models of governance that seek to maximize the freedom of markets and individual choice at the expense of all other moral considerations.

If there was any doubt what +Cupich meant, his reference to ?individual choice at the expense of all other moral considerations? certainly made me think he was talking about, among other things, abortion, but not only abortion, that is, the consistent ethic of life.

I watched the press conference that +Cupich had with EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy. The event was not, as D?Souza claims, about Laudato Si? specifically. They were announcing the archdiocese?s enrollment in an EPA program that will assess the current energy usage of the physical plant of the archdiocese and devise ways to lower energy usage and costs. The fact that the press conference came after the publication of Laudato Si? allowed the archbishop, and Administrator McCarthy, to reference the document. But, they both would have had to reach to include the one paragraph in that encyclical about abortion at an event aimed at discussing the monitoring of energy usage in century-old infrastructure.

The third example D?Souza cites is the sermon preached by +Cupich when he received his pallium earlier this month. D?Souza might have mentioned it was a masterful sermon. +Cupich preached on the readings of the day, drawing special attention to the Petrine ministry and how it assists the Church to both preserve fidelity to the whole tradition of the Church and to build unity among the churches. He did not really get into any ethical issues as I recall. I suppose he could have brought up abortion, but I am not sure how it would have fit into the text.

What makes D?Souza?s charge ridiculously bizarre is the obvious fact of the Chicago Tribune op-ed in the first place. So far I know, +Cupich was the only U.S. prelate to publish an op-ed on the subject of the Planned Parenthood videos in a national newspaper. Many bishops made statements, or devoted their column in their diocesan newspapers to the subject, but +Cupich is the only one who addressed the issue in a national format. A couple of days after the op-ed was published, they were talking about it on ?Morning Joe.? Does Fr. D?Souza think the archbishop must raise the issue each and every time? . In any event, I note that the Holy Father, in his Angelus address yesterday, failed to mention abortion. Maybe Fr. D?Souza?s next column in the Register can call him out for failing to do so.
I also note that Fr. D’Souza is not from the United States so perhaps he is not aware the degree to which our bishops’ statements on the role of faith in the public square have been tilted towards a prioritization of the abortion issue to the exclusion of other issues. Perhaps he does not recall the bishops walking away from the Affordable Care Act because they could not get the Stupak Amendment attached, even though the content of that amendment was issued as an executive order simultaneously. Perhaps he is unfamiliar with the distorted analysis in Faithful Citizenship, the bishops’ document on voting, which introduced the idea of intrinsic evil, which has no bearing on public policy, instead of grave evil, which does, precisely to differentiate and highlight abortion above all other issues. (To the degree that +Cupich is trying to restore a sense of balance, in clear alignment with the Holy Father, more power to him, and I suspect that D’Souza, unwilling to attack the Holy Father, is simply attacking one of the pope’s closest U.S. collaborators. The right tried this with Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez too, so +Cupich is in good company.) Perhaps, Fr. D’Souza should concentrate on his own Canadian bishops.

At RenewAmerica, Matt Abbott chastises those who have begun to criticize Archbishop Charles Chaput because some of the speakers at the World Meet of Families are insufficiently pro-life. The charge is absurd on its face, but consider the source. The Lepanto Institute? (Now, there is a non-histrionic name for an organization!) This group is an off-shoot of the American Life League which has been battering the bishops for years to adopt their extremist positions, sometimes with success. As for ChurchMilitant.com, does anyone really look at that except for a kind of admittedly sinful (delectatio morosa) delight in its sheer insanity? I am glad that Archbishop Chaput is pushing back against their foolish, but also mendacious, attacks. Indeed, Abbott helpfully publishes an email +Chaput sent him:

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Both Lepanto and Church Militant sow division wherever they tread. They do not seem to acknowledge the need to work with civic society and its representatives on a project like the World Meeting of Families. And we are not going to spend/waste time arguing with them. They are sincere, but also destructive. No one on our leadership team supports abortion or Planned Parenthood.

It is no secret that Archbishop Chaput and I do not often agree, but I am with him one thousand percent on this. These groups are just plain nasty and their efforts are, as he says, destructive.

Finally, in yesterday’s Washington Post, George Will lent his imprimatur to the assisted suicide movement. He thus abandons all pretence to being a Burkean, but that is the least of the problems with his worrisome article.

Will establishes the basis for his support in the opening lines: ?Brittany Maynard was soon to die. The question was whether she could do so on her own terms, as a last act of autonomy.? He returns to the theme of autonomy in his last sentences, writing, ?There is nobility in suffering bravely borne, but also in affirming at the end the distinctive human dignity of autonomous choice.? I have never thought of Will as a libertarian, but there it is. Certainly, a man of his erudition and learning should know that the roots of human dignity are denser than the fact that we can make autonomous choices. He seems to be playing the part of a screenwriter, looking for a last, bold statement, a cry in the darkness, Thelma and Louise driving into the canyon. But, the end of life, like the beginning of life, is a great lesson in human dependence, first on God, and secondly on other human beings. Life?s end can assuredly be a time of darkness, but the cry human dignity should place in our hearts and mouths is a cry for solidarity and accompaniment and grace.

There are other problems with Will?s op-ed. After noting that ?30 percent of Medicare expenditures are
for patients in the last six months of life, he writes, Financial reasons should not be decisive in setting end-of-life policy, but. Whence the ?but?? Financial reasons should not be decisive in setting end-of-life policy period. He notes the slippery slope dangers, but dismisses them, and this is one issue, as evidence from Belgium and the Netherlands suggest, where we should be attentive to the slipperiness of the slope.

Will’s strangest argument is stated thus:

[Dr.] Cederquist says that most common reason for requesting assistance in dying is not intolerable physical suffering. Rather, it is existential suffering, including loss of meaning, as from the ability to relate to others. The prospect of being unable to interact can be as intolerable as physical suffering and cannot be alleviated by hospice or other palliative care.

This, from the same George Will who mocked the Supreme Court when it spoke of the variability of human efforts to ascribe meaning in Casey v. Planned Parenthood? I know some twenty-somethings who, as far as I can tell, are unable to interact. Should we prescribe them a lethal dose? Where is the sympathy for the person going through such an existential crisis? Does he not know that hundreds upon hundreds of hospice workers provide such sympathy, and affirm the dignity of the dying, each and every day?

It is especially disconcerting that Mr. Will, who has written powerfully about his son who has Down Syndrome, seems so unalert to the ways assisted suicide will further devalue the lives of those who are in some way disabled. At the beginning of life, this calculation is already routinely made, as a majority of all unborn children with Down Syndrome are aborted. Are those lives not worth living? Or, are they to be allowed a shot at life and a lethal dose when we are tired of helping them? It is shocking.

What unites these three articles? Americans do not even know how to discuss issues of abortion or euthanasia in an intelligent, morally serious way. The discussion in the public square usually gets railroaded into partisan positions that have not seriously affected the abortion debate in this country in forty years. The great value of the consistent ethic of life is that it provides an opening for everyone to examine his or her conscience on these issues and recognize, as the Master explained in the Gospel yesterday, that it is what comes from within us that defiles. (Jesus did not specify abortion in his list, and did not put murder ahead of other concerns either, so perhaps Fr. D’Souza can write an article for the Register chastising Him!) The problem is deeper than our admittedly horrific abortion rate. It is deeper than the fact that frustration with the easy acceptance of that abortion rate leads some people to extremes. The problem is deeper than the fact that George Will has decided to endorse euthanasia. The problem is that Americans think conscience is whim and casually accept all manner of moral contradictions when they consider what we owe to each other, as human beings and as fellow citizens. It is Archbishop Cupich and other advocates of the consistent ethic of life who have at least a shot at reawakening the conscience of the men and women of our time, and directing it towards a more humane future, cognizant that God will not be mocked, and His promises, not only His laws, should direct us, confidently, hopefully, toward that more humane future.