The Washington Post's bias on abortion

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Saturday morning, The Washington Post ran an article entitled "Faith is increasingly mixing with care: A report on consolidation says that 1 in 6 U.S. hospital beds is in a Catholic system." Sounds innocuous enough, except the headline in the morning paper was changed from the original headline when the article went online. That read: "1 in 6 hospital beds is in a Catholic institution, restricting reproductive care." This latter headline, which ran first, better captures the biased nature of this article which offends both my journalistic sensibilities, my liberal sensibilities and my Catholic sensibilities. Let's start with the journalistic problems.

The editors had these competing headlines because they probably thought the on-line headline was too biased. But, the one in the print edition is telling also. Is "faith" "increasingly" mixing with the delivery of health care? Hasn't faith always been involved with the delivery of health care in this country? I can't think of a war nor an epidemic in U.S. history in which Catholic religious sisters were not on the front lines comforting the ill, from the cholera epidemic of 1832 until the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. Alas, it would be better for journalism if more journalists had degrees in history than in journalism.
Sandhya Somasekhar and Julie Zauzmer note that the report which prompted their article was conducted by the American Civil Liberties Union and a group called Merger Watch. They also note that the ACLU is suing Catholic health care systems, and the Catholic bishop too, over the issue at hand, namely the fact that Catholic hospitals are Catholic and, consequently, our maternity wards always take care of both patients. That's how Catholics think about it, not as "restricting reproductive care." Yet, the reporters are not the least dubious about the report's bias. The first couple of graphs read like a press release from these groups, not like a news story.

The reporters quote Lois Utley, the director of Merger Watch, who says, "The two types of hospitals that have grown are Catholic-affiliated and for-profit. All other kinds are declining." Hmmm. I wonder why that might be? Apparently, neither the reporters nor the editors at the Post seemed interested in finding out why. Nor did they discover, as they would have if they had asked around a little bit, that this fact is especially odd because Catholic health care in not only non-profit, but Catholic hospitals dedicate millions of hours and treatments in free care to the indigent every year. How, then, are they so successful? I thought reporters were supposed to be inquisitive?

If the reporters followed this trail, they would have understood that the "mixing" of faith with health care shapes the way Catholic health care is delivered in this very specific way: We place a special emphasis on caring for the poor. Consequently, if you are one of the 50 million Americans who live below or at the poverty line, the fact that one in six hospitals is a Catholic hospital is very good news. Alas, the ACLU and Merger Watch are the kind of liberals I most dislike, more concerned with their pet culture war projects and unconcerned with the poor. So, yes, the church mixes faith with care, and the poor in these United States are glad of it.

The reporters note that the USCCB "could not be reached for comment." I am not sure what that means. I never have trouble reaching the communications office at the USCCB. Did they try reaching Sr. Carol Keehan, CEO of the Catholic Health Association? Did they call the local Catholic hospitals? Did they call the local archbishop? Hell, I have written on this topic and they could have called me. No, instead they call Matt Bowman who works with a Republican/evangelical organization and who has written for fringe right-wing groups like CatholicVote.org and Renew America. It is like turning to Monica Lewinsky for a quote about Hillary Clinton. I am sure she would have something to say, but I am not sure that something would provide balance or objectivity. Mr. Bowman's comment has zeal, but evidences no desire to persuade.

Ms. Somasekhar is described as a "social change reporter" in the Post's website. Ms. Zauzmer is described as a "local news reporter." Are they aware that the Post has a couple of fine religion reporters? Maybe they could have gotten some help acquiring the other side of the story from these colleagues? Are there any editors over there at the Post paying attention?

On to the merits of the argument. The ACLU is an organization I once admired but they have not only lost their way, they seem to have lost their mind. What possible conception of civil liberty would grant someone the right to procure an abortion but not also grant someone the right to abstain from performing one? Is their commitment to abortion rights so myopic that they miss the insanity of that proposition? There is a kind of myopia unique to inside the Beltway types, found on both the left and the right, and it is
formidable. Still, the idea that the government should coerce Catholics into performing abortions is so obviously the kind of government overreach the ACLU usually opposes, it is shocking they do not grasp it.

Perhaps they think that organizations should be compelled to do this or that, but not individuals. Our American understanding of rights is excessively individualistic. But, the ACLU supported unions in the Friedrichs v. California case, in which individuals challenged the law that required them to contribute to a union the value of the services that union provided them, even if they chose not to join the union. If a union has the right to negotiate on behalf of all the workers in a given shop, why does a Catholic hospital not have the right to prescribe certain ethical norms? I again refer readers to Lew Daly's article on this subject of group rights which is the best thing written on it to date.

Further, if the ACLU is so worried that in some parts of the country, the only hospital that is close by might be a Catholic hospital, there is absolutely nothing in this great, free country of ours to prevent them from opening their own hospitals.

I will let you in on a little secret: I am glad that the ACLU is so loony on this issue. Most of my pro-choice friends do recognize that the legality of abortion is morally complicated: They know abortion is not a good thing, but they are reluctant to judge anyone who procures one, and so they think it should be legal. (By the way, I am opposed to abortion but I am also opposed to judging those who procure one. The two are not mutually exclusive.) Most of my pro-choice friends are not interested in coercing people or organization to perform abortions. Most of the pro-choice people I know thought Bill Clinton got it right when he called for abortion to be "safe, legal and rare." They know, too, that in Europe, abortion is illegal after 12 or 14 weeks in most countries and the women there are not especially oppressed. So, to your average pro-choice person, these ACLU lawsuits are the legal equivalent of the tweets from NARAL during the Super Bowl, objecting to a Doritos ad because it "humanized the fetus." When the pro-choice professionals sound really nuts, that is good for us on the pro-life side because it drives those who are pro-choice but not crazy to think about the issue anew.

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Of course, there is one way to lose this fight: Label it a "religious liberty" fight. That brand has been thoroughly discredited because it has been turned now into a justification for discriminating against gays and lesbians. When people, even people in Georgia and North Carolina, start seeing jobs leave their states because corporations do not want to be associated with discrimination, and when the NFL threatens to move the Super Bowl, you know you have ruined your brand. Those who genuinely care about religious liberty need to take three steps back and be very quiet for awhile if they wish to see the words religious liberty appear once again without the scare quotes. If the religious liberty zealots match the abortion zealots at the ACLU, the possibility of sensible discussion and civil concord is slim.

I expect The Washington Post to stake out an editorial stance and I am not surprised that theirs will be a pro-choice stance when it comes to legal abortion. But, those of us who read the Post every morning have a reasonable expectation that the paper's biases will be restricted to the opinion pages. Apparently not.

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