

Kmiec persuasive at press club

Michael Sean Winters | May. 28, 2009 NCR Today

At the National Press Club Professors Doug Kmiec and Robert George had a public discussion on the Obama Administration and Life Issues. The event was moderated by Professor Mary Ann Glendon.

Kmiec wins by just showing up. After all, Professor George's position boils down to the assertion that there is nothing to discuss.

In his presentation, filled with graphic descriptions of abortion procedures, George makes bold claims. He says that Obama supports public funding of abortion and is seeking to enact such funding but President Obama has never suggested such a thing. George claims that science has determined the issue of abortion, not philosophy or theology, but he asserts this without making an argument. I cannot imagine a scientific experiment that could determine the legal status of the unborn child. We Catholics believe that the unborn child is a human person but many non-Catholics, including many people of good will, consider the fetus something not yet a human person. I think the Church is right, of course, but I can also see why others do not see it our way.

And, I certainly do not see how I can persuade them they are wrong if I start the discussion with an assertion that they are somehow willfully, even maliciously, ignorant of what I believe.

There is nothing smooth about Professor Kmiec. He is reasonable, but not slippery. He keeps his focus on the political landscape and how the Church interacts with that landscape, not on repeating the arguments against abortion. After citing the many and myriad ways the President's policies cohere with Catholic social teaching, from immigration reform to universal health insurance to the environment.

"Yet there is the question of abortion," he said. "The way to answer that question is not through intimidation. The denial of communion is intimidation." He notes his own experience of being denied communion last year and also the case of John Kerry in St. Louis and Joe Biden in Denver and Kathleen Sebelius in Kansas. "I suggest that is not an effective nor a Catholic approach."

Kmiec commended Notre Dame, and specifically Father Jenkins, for seeing their invitation to the President in an appropriate Catholic context. He noted that Jenkins said, with the President sitting there, that we Catholics disagree with him on abortion. Professor George did not address the Notre Dame controversy.

The key differences in the presentations are one of style and one of substance. Kmiec is all persuasion and George is all assertion. Substantively, it turns out they both agree about abortion being wrong, but disagree about what the political ramifications of that agreed position entail. This is a political disagreement. But, George jumps from the political to the ontological and back again with no regard for differing opinions. In a pluralistic society, that is a recipe for isolated braying.

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