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Abortion and Inflammatory Rhetoric

by Michael Sean Winters

NCR Today

"We are at war!" thundered Bishop Robert Finn **in a keynote address** to the Gospel of Life Convention six weeks ago.

"This war to which I refer did not begin in just the last several months, although new battles are underway," a clear reference to the new Obama administration. Finn sees a less proximate enemy at work. "Our enemy is the deceiver, the liar, Satan. Because of his spiritual powers he can turn the minds and hearts of men. He is our spiritual or supernatural enemy when he works to tempt us, and he becomes a kind of natural enemy as he works in the hearts of other people to twist and confound God's will."

The bishop goes on to acknowledge that "Human beings are not Satan, but certainly they can come under his power, even without their fully realizing it."

Bishop Finn did not advocate violence. Indeed, in his speech he specifically warned against it. "We cannot hate these human enemies, and we must find a way to love them," he told the Convention in that same speech. The weapons he enumerated later in his speech were the rosary and the scapular, a blessing as a sign of unity within the Church, frequent confession and worthy Communion.

Mark Silk, who is one of the most thoughtful and learned commentators on religion in America, commented on these words of Bishop Finn yesterday and asked the difficult questions: "Is none of Dr. Tiller's blood on Bishop Finn's hands? I wouldn't presume to say so. Will any responsibility be shouldered by Bishop Finn? I'm not holding my breath. But somebody in the pro-life movement should have the decency at least to entertain the possibility that what happened today in Wichita is a consequence of the heating up of anti-abortion rhetoric since the election of Barack Obama. And to urge that it be cooled down." See Silk's column here. <http://www.spiritual->

politics.org/2009/05/abortion_reduction_kansas_style.html

Silk's question is not merely a recognition that there is always some extremist who might take some word of a person in authority and twist it to suit their own nefarious purposes. Yes, bishops must be cognizant of how their preachings are used by others. But, careful words are no guarantee against the kind of craziness that leads a person to murder another. I think Silk's point is that you can't use inflammatory language and then say "Well, I don't mean to be inflammatory." When you draw an analogy between abortion and the Holocaust, you paint a mental picture in which the bad guys are Nazis and it is no use then saying, "Oh, I did not mean to compare anyone to them!"

I fear that the reason for the warfare language, and for the Holocaust comparisons, is not that it gets people worked up. My guess is that the attendees at a Gospel of Life Convention were already worked up and sometimes it is the soft word that moves the human heart. St. Francis famously preached the Gospel but only rarely had recourse to words. No, I suspect the warfare language stems, in part, from a different desire, a desire to be listened to and obeyed. A general is obeyed, no questions asked. Some of our bishops, alas, know that their own flocks are no longer listening to them and instead of analyzing why, they lash out and use inappropriate metaphors that cast themselves in the role of a man to be listened to and obeyed.

The use of Holocaust analogies, always a sign that you are losing the argument, is a grasping for certainty. Human history is a catalogue of crime and the human heart is, as Bishop Finn indicated, ever at war with its own demons. But, at Auschwitz, the Enemy was at his purest. But, the SS Guards knew they were killing human beings and our modern culture has convinced us that the unborn child, at least at the early stages of development, is not yet a human person.

To persuade the culture that this de-humanized vision of life is wrong requires persuasion, and especially the great persuasion of Christian witness. Orders from episcopal generals won't accomplish it. Telling a group of conventioners that we are at war won't accomplish it. What are we, as a church, willing to sacrifice to demonstrate our commitment to unborn life? What are we willing to do to help the women in this country? and the economic meltdown already shows the abortion rate heading north? see every unborn child as a blessing and provide the assistance so she can keep her baby?

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