Contra Fr. de Souza's criticism of Civiltà

Michael Sean Winters  |  Jul. 17, 2017  |  Distinctly Catholic

Friday, I wrote about the blockbuster article in Civiltà Cattolica by Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro and Rev. Marcelo Figueroa entitled "Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism in the USA: A surprising ecumenism." The response to the Civiltà article has been quite remarkable, which is a good thing because the authors have initiated a conversation that has been whispered for sometime in official circles but which is now in the full light of day. Today, I would like to look at one of the responses, that by Fr. Raymond de Souza, published at Crux.

I chose de Souza because he raises the most serious challenge, the idea that none of what Spadaro and Figueroa write is based on reality. He cites this paragraph in the original piece:

"Some who profess themselves to be Catholic express themselves in ways that until recently were unknown in their tradition and using tones much closer to Evangelicals. They are defined as value voters as far as attracting electoral mass support is concerned. There is a well-defined world of ecumenical convergence between sectors that are paradoxically competitors when it comes to confessional belonging. This meeting over shared objectives happens around such themes as abortion, same-sex marriage, religious education in schools and other matters generally considered moral or tied to values. Both Evangelical and Catholic Integralists condemn traditional ecumenism and yet promote an ecumenism of conflict that unites them in the nostalgic dream of a theocratic type of state. However, the most dangerous prospect for this strange ecumenism is attributable to its xenophobic and Islamophobic vision that wants walls and purifying deportations. The word 'ecumenism' transforms into a paradox, into an 'ecumenism of hate.' Intolerance is a celestial mark of purism. Reductionism is the exegetical methodology. Ultraliteralism is its hermeneutical key."

And, de Souza asks:

"All that would certainly be alarming. But is it happening? Who are 'those who profess to be Catholic' who 'dream of a theocratic type of state'? What journals expound their thoughts? In what faculties do they teach? What books have they written? What movements does their thought animate?"

One does not have to advocate a return to the Papal States, and their extension to the U.S., to have theocratic leanings. Such leanings may not issue in constitutional provisions to achieve the kind of corrupting complicity with the world that Pope Francis warns against. Way back in 2006 Damon Linker wrote a book called Theocons that examined the phenomenon of conservative religious leaders reducing religion to ethics and thence to politics, concentrating on such conservative, and non-crackpot, luminaries as the late Fr. Richard Neuhaus. It was Neuhaus who spearheaded the "Catholics and Evangelicals Together" effort of the 1990s. The "ecumenism of hate" that Spadaro and Figueroa identify may make de Souza uncomfortable, but it is not a figment of their imagination.

Fr. de Souza writes regularly for one of the journals, the National Catholic Register, that advances the
conservative Catholic and evangelical alliance rooted in the politics of abortion and gay marriage among other items. I just went to their website yesterday and there are four articles hostile to the LGBT community on the homepage, three of them attacking Jesuit Fr. Jim Martin, for daring to suggest that Catholics should reach out to the LGBT community. One post highlights the conflation of religion and politics, if not in an explicitly theocratic state, something closer to that than the separation embedded in our Constitution: "Pray for Justice Anthony Kennedy to Retire and Repent." Check out the Register's "Election Special" comparing the candidates on the issues, and see if you see a bias? My favorite Register article so far this year, not least because of the veneer of intellectualism with which it is presented, is this article by Paul Kengor. [5] about President Barack Obama who was really a totalitarian. Really.

I also came across an article at the Register by Fr. de Souza that opens with this breathless sentence: "President Donald Trump delivered one of the most Catholic speeches [6] in recent memory in Warsaw on July 6, 2017." Later on, de Souza writes that "As astonishing as it is to observe, Donald Trump sounded a bit like Benedict XVI on the future of Europe." He acknowledges that Trump is "a very flawed vessel for the message of God, family and sacrifice for the common good." And he even acknowledges that his audience, a Poland governed by a regime that curtails civil rights and traffics in linkages between bloodlines and political success that were discredited by the Nazis. Then why was the speech so great?

Fr. de Souza complains that the Civitla article only points to Church Militant as an example of the kind of Catholic organization that fits their indictment. "Perhaps Michael Voris is successful, but only a vast ignorance of the American Catholic scene would consider Church Militant to be influential, let alone representative," de Souza writes. I suppose that depends on what you mean by representative. You could go to other websites or journals and find a similar bias towards a Republican agenda, a bias that in no way is required by a commitment to the Catholic faith in its fullness and integrity and in some ways should be, but isn't, challenged by the Catholic faith: First Things, CatholicVote.org, LifeSiteNews, Fr. Longenecker's blog at Patheos, the Acton Institute Power Blog and Catholic World Report. The Civitla authors could have chosen any of these, as they could have focused on the Register and its parent organization EWTN. Did I tell you about my friend who applied for a job at EWTN and who was told during one of the interviews that their reporters were never to criticize Donald Trump?

At none of those websites will you find the kind of trenchant, and conservative, moral critique of President Donald Trump that has been offered by Michael Gerson. His article last week [7] on the absence of any evidence of a conscience in the president or his administration stated powerfully of the president's "win at any cost" approach to elections and governance, "A faith that makes losing a sin will make cheating a sacrament." Gerson is a political conservative and an evangelical. He is not a shill. I can't think of a conservative Catholic voice which has maintained the kind of moral seriousness and intellectual integrity that Gerson has.

Gerson, alas, does not speak for most evangelicals. Some have criticized Spadaro and Figueroa for failing to detect the varieties of evangelicalism, a criticism that I think is unfair because they were focusing on this problem, not writing a dissertation on the history of evangelicalism. I wish they had added a single sentence noting the fine intellectual contributions to public discourse by such evangelical scholars as Richard Muow, George Marsden, Mark Noll, and James Bratt, but no one can argue that these men have had anything like the influence on evangelicals demonstrated by Falwell Sr. and Jr., Joel Osteen, James Dobson or Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. Want proof? As of April, according to Pew, three quarters of white evangelicals "strongly approved" of the job President Trump is doing. Those people were not students of Bratt's I am guessing.

One thing that I do criticize Fr. Spadaro and Rev. Figueroa for is not explaining that while Church Militant may not be mainstream, it is not too far afield from the conservative Catholic mainstream either. Voris and his team of zealots may not have many subscribers, but EWTN, which is more nuanced, reaches many Catholics. Can a zealot who reaches few do more harm than a strong bias (and a bias against Francis) that reaches millions? Not
only that, as any honest chancery official can tell you, the church does such a lousy job reaching young people, the few young people that a bishop is likely to meet fit the EWTN mold, giving pastoral leaders a distorted sense of what the lay faithful really think and feel about any particular topic. This is an issue that will concern this blog frequently in the next year as we prepare for the Synod of 2018 on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment. For this reason, I wish Spadaro and Figueroa had selected EWTN not Church Militant to make their case.

Another line of criticism that has emerged over the weekend, though not one leveled by de Souza, and which must be debunked at the start of this conversation is that the left does it too, that Spadaro and Figueroa could have undertaken a broad examination of the same kinds of disturbing conflations of religion and politics on the left as they did on the right, with the same kind of shaky, and un-Catholic, intellectual pedigree. But, the two greatest alignments of the political left with the Christian churches in the 20th century started with religious insights, not political ones: The social teaching of the Catholic Church on social justice issues made its way through the labor movement and, eventually, into the Democratic Party platform and the policies of the New Deal, and the Civil Rights movement was born in the black church, and the Democrats eventually jumped on board. There was no equivalent on the religious and political left to the meetings in the spring of 1979 at which political operatives Richard Viguerie, Howard Phillips and Paul Weyrich, met with the Rev. Jerry Falwell in a successful effort to get him to launch what became the Moral Majority.

As well, it is worth noting that on the Catholic left there are plenty of prominent pro-life Democrats who are not shy about stating our positions, criticizing our party and its leaders, being to the Democrats what Gerson is to today's Republicans. Stephen Schneck, Cathy Kaveny, Nick Cafardi, Tony Annett, John Gehring, Charles Camosy, Meghan Clark and myself all write frequently for popular publications and we have all challenged the political left when we are inspired, in large part by our Catholic faith, to do so. Who is the conservative Catholic writer who so frequently challenges the Republican Party on economics or immigration or climate change or the death penalty or military spending? Yet it is we who were labeled "cafeteria Catholics"!!!!

The response to the article in Civiltà was out of all proportion to the argument it contained. Which leads to my last point. The reason so many people are in such high dudgeon is that they now can attack Pope Francis without attacking Pope Francis. Both Fr. Spadaro and Rev. Figueroa are known to be close associates of the pope, but they are not the pope, so it is safe to hurl arrows their way. But, the critics are not fooling anyone. What Spadaro and Figueroa had to say is as obvious as the nose on your face. Those attacking them thought they owned the Church and are angry that Pope Francis has demonstrated that they do not. They were wrong. Now they are angry. It is pitiable.

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