

Cardinal George's Committees on Catholic Identity

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 18, 2009 NCR Today

I know that some felt nothing but shock and dismay at Cardinal George's announcement that "we have recently begun discussions on how we might strengthen our [the bishops'] relationship to Catholic universities, to media claiming to be a voice in the Church, and to organizations that direct various works under Catholic auspices."

I was not shocked because in his book *The Difference God Makes*, Cardinal George was quite specific that the dominant view of the role of religion in American society, sketched first and most famously by deToqueville as "voluntary associations" was not the way the Catholic tradition viewed the Church. As well, the Cardinal mentions several times that as bishops, the current code of canon law does not provide effective tools of governance, and that the need to govern better is among the most obvious needs for the episcopate. Yet, for American Catholics, formed in a culture marked by self-forming religious congregations beginning with Thomas Hooker's break with Massachusetts to found Connecticut unto our own day when Jerry Falwell broke from the Park Avenue Baptist Church to found Thomas Road Baptist Church, we do not always grasp how we must stand against our culture in understanding our own ecclesiology.

I was not dismayed because I admit that there are times when I see something and think of a classmate in seminary who is now a monsignor in Maine. He would say, "That's not very Catholic." Whenever I read a press release from Catholics for Choice, I think "that's not very Catholic." Whenever I hear Father Bob Sirico defend libertarian economics on EWTN I think "that's not very Catholic."

There is another aspect of American culture that fits in here, namely, our distrust of inquisitorial practices. Cardinal George is a very bright man and he surely understands that the immediate affect of any kind of ecclesiastical condemnation is to vaunt the work or organization condemned to new found notoriety. Our culture lionizes dissent, which is why those who exercise it often look foolish claiming the mantle of a prophet for their stance. But, the committees Cardinal George is setting up will need to see their mission more in the form of a discussion than of an investigation. They must tread carefully if they are not to see a project that could be promising go astray and cause more harm than good.

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