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WSJ Gets It Wrong

by Michael Sean Winters

NCR Today

The Wall Street Journal has an especially obnoxious column today that asks in its headline, "In Hospital Deal, How Much Is a Catholic Identity Worth? Just 3 Percent." This is crazy.

The Caritas hospital system in Boston is in danger of going under. It found a buyer who was willing to pump the necessary revenue into the system. The buyer has said, on the record, that maintaining the Catholic identity of the hospitals is in everyone's interest. Yes, there is a provision that if that identity becomes untenable for financial reasons, the new owners can secularize the hospitals for a fee equal to 3 percent of the purchase price. Does this intend some nefarious secularist plot? Or is it a legal provision designed as a hedge against some future over-zealous efforts by some of Boston's many crazies to re-define Catholic identity in ways that make it impossible to keep the hospitals going?

It is telling that the article quotes C. J. Doyle of the Catholic Action League. Mr. Doyle is a Catholic who has made a name for himself by questioning the motives and character of his ecclesiastical superior. He denounces Cardinal Sean O'Malley for all manner of crimes from presiding at the funeral of Sen. Ted Kennedy to the now impending hospital sale. Doyle is quoted in the Journal as saying that the patrimony of the Catholic Church in Boston is being "systematically dismantled and improvidently discarded." He notes the closing of parishes and the consolidation of Catholic schools as further evidence. In fact, in the face of severe economic difficulties and demographic changes, the Archdiocese of Boston is doing its best to preserve what can be preserved of a Catholic subculture that was once the pride of Boston but which is now financially untenable.

We can all wish that the Church was rolling in money and could maintain all its schools and hospitals and parishes. We can all admire the ways our forebears constructed a network of Catholic institutions that served our people. But, it is time for new wine skins. We cannot allow our nostalgia to obscure the need

to make hard, difficult decisions about what is best for the Church in Boston today.

For all the sense of loss that we naturally feel when a parish closes or a hospital system must be sold to a secular buyer, the doom and gloom from the Catholic Action League misses the signs of new life in the Spirit that one discovers in Boston. The faithful are giving again, with their time and their money. The seminary is filling up again. New ecclesial communities such as Focolare and Communion and Liberation are active in Boston and breathing new life into the Church, not through the traditional parish structures but through their own unique charisms. Mr. Doyle's efforts would be better used raising money for the Church instead of slamming his bishop.

In the event, one thing is certain about the Church of Boston, whether the Wall Street Journal chooses to acknowledge it or not. Cardinal O'Malley is not one to trade away Catholic identity but to find new, creative ways to express that identity. Time marches on. The Church of tomorrow, in Boston and elsewhere, will not look like the Church of yesterday, except in its essentials and there is not a bishop in America who is more committed to our identity as Catholics than O'Malley.

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