

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

July 15, 2010 at 6:42am

Are They Racists?

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

The NAACP passed a resolution calling out the racism it has witnessed in the Tea Party movement. The Tea Party spokespeople, and their champions such as Sarah Palin, have denied the charge. They note that their organization is about "individual rights" and so it could not be capable of racism, which is something of a non sequitur, but one does not turn to the Tea Party crowd in search of intellectual precision.

So, are they racists? I only attended one Tea Party rally, on the steps of the Capitol the day of the final House vote on health care. I saw several posters that portrayed the President as a witch doctor, which struck me as a portrayal that would have been unlikely if the President was lily white and named Smith. There were some posters challenging the President's birth certificate, and therefore his legitimacy, a question I do not recall being raised for any of the 43 presidents who preceded Mr. Obama in office. I have no reason to think that everyone was a racist, or even most, but I saw no effort by anyone to challenge those whose signs had these racist overtones.

On CNN last night, a spokesman for the Tea Party Express spokesman, Mark Williams, began his argument against the NAACP by saying that he was surprised such an accusation could come from an organization that has the words "Colored People" in its name. This dismissal of the history of one of the truly outstanding institutions in American life — and precisely the kind of non-governmental, civil society organization that the Tea Party pretends to celebrate — is, well, evidence of either unspeakable stupidity or of a core dismissive attitude towards blacks that is the very heart of racism. You don't need to don a white sheet to qualify as a racist just as you don't need service as a guard at Auschwitz on your resume to qualify as an anti-Semite.

A similar concern about racism surfaced in a recent survey of Latinos. 30 percent said that racism and

prejudice is the primary reason for the concern about the immigration issue, while only 14 percent said they thought it was motivated by concerns for national security. 11 percent said that the issue was being used as a fear tactic to win the next election, which could be an extension of the concern about racism. Only 7 percent thought that fear of undocumented workers taking jobs from U.S. citizens was a prime motivator and only 5 percent thought that Hispanics continuing to speak Spanish and not assimilating was motivating the discussion. (H/T to Ben Smith at Politico for bringing this survey to my attention.)

You only need to listen to Tom Tancredo for five minutes to understand that this perception among Latinos is accurate. Last month I wrote about the attacks on Congresswoman Linda Sanchez when she pointed out that some of the funding for the lead group supporting the Arizona anti-immigrant law came from a group of white supremacists. One website called the Latina congresswoman "dirty" which, again, was not a comment on her hygiene, and it wasn't something they would have said about a white lady, so it was racism. Does it mean that everyone who is concerned about immigration is a racist? No. But, the controversy about the Arizona law shows the insidious way racism can operate without being explicit. The law orders police to demand "papers" from those they "suspect" of being in the country illegally. Yes, the law says there will be no racial profiling, but how else does one attain a suspicion about a person's legal status? Latinos know how this will play out, that whether they are citizens or not, whether they have served in the armed forces of the United States or not, they will be subject to questioning in ways their white neighbors won't. That is why the law is racist.

No movement is entirely responsible for the statements and actions of all of its members, but all members of a group are responsible for holding each other accountable. If a Catholic makes an anti-Semitic remark in my hearing, it is my job to correct him. If a Republican congressman votes for higher taxes, his fellow party members have a right to discipline him. We are waiting for the Tea Party to call on the racists in their midst to change or leave. Otherwise, the few will tar the whole. They may not like it. They may not think it fair. But if they decline the obvious remedy of calling out their own, they have no one to blame but themselves.

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