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Is Obama Going to Pull a Tony Blair?

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

The First Lady evidently let it slip that her husband keeps a prayer card of Our Lady, Help of Christians, in his wallet. Very RC.

A few months ago, in an address on the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, President Obama spoke movingly about the Blessing of the Fleet. Again, very RC.

And, the other day, when asked about his Christian faith, the President described his decision to become a Christian in terms that were, while not exactly Catholic, decidedly non-Protestant.

The President said:

“So I came to my Christian faith later in life and it was because the precepts of Jesus Christ spoke to me in terms of the kind of life that I would want to lead -- being my brothers and sisters, keeping, treating others as they would treat me. And I think also understanding that Jesus Christ dying for my sins spoke to the humility we all have to have as human beings, that we’re sinful and we’re flawed and we make mistakes, and that we achieve salvation through the grace of God. But what we can do, as flawed as we are, is still see God in other people and do our best to help them find their own grace.”

Now, there is a great problem with this formulation, putting the “precepts” first as if the Virgin Mary had given birth to a Summa. There is also the complicating fact that those who knew Jesus best, who understood his precepts in the soci-religio-cultural terms of the day, saw fit to put him to death. If Mr. Obama can name any other first century man condemned to death whose verdict he thinks was unjust, I should like him to name the him. After all, if there was no resurrection, I doubt Jesus’ precepts would have made it to the second century let alone the twenty-first.

Now, while I recognize the danger of paraphrasing the President, I think that what Mr. Obama meant to say was that it was the way Jesus lived that attracted him, or in dogmatic terms, it was the mystery of the Incarnation that attracted him. This is, after all, how the apostles came to recognize the divinity of Christ, in his humanity. This is very RC and very non-Prod.

Protestants put all their emphasis on the resurrection, not the incarnation. The Puritans banned the celebration of Christmas. For them, conversion is a moment of grace, a decisive moment, whereas Catholics tend to see grace working in many ways at all time, bringing a soul to conversion of heart, a conversion that does not cease when one accepts Christ. Catholics do not call themselves 'saved' after their conversion experience but tend to think of salvation as the interplay of grace and nature over the course of one's lifetime. Conversion is a lifelong process more than a singular event for the Catholic. In short, salvation is tied up with how we live, with the 'precepts' that govern our attitudes and actions.

So, the evidence is accumulating that Barack Obama is, in his heart of hearts, waiting to swim the Tiber. Kind of like Tony Blair, although Obama need not wait until he leaves office. I suggest that we invite him to come over to St. Matthew's Cathedral, which is just up the street from the White House, to check out the RCIA. And, what better way to pushback against the still resilient story that he is not a Christian than to publicly convert to Catholicism!

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