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"Gov't Schools" v. "Public Schools"

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Earlier, I called attention to the collaboration of Republican Gov. Chris Christie and Democratic Mayor Cory Booker to secure a huge, \$100 million matching grant from zillionaire Mark Zuckerberg to help fix the miserable public schools in Newark. This collaboration was called to my attention by my friend Rick Garnett, professor of law at the University of Notre Dame and a principal contributor at the always worth reading blog "Mirror of Justice."

Garnett has written a blog post about the money, in which he suggests that the money might be better spent if it were to be given to the Catholic schools in that city. I agree entirely. But, nothing absolves us, as citizens, from the obligation to fix the public schools. The reasons those schools are so dreadful are many and complicated, and the results of the recent mayoral race here in D.C. do not bode well for the kind of radical fixes the failing public schools require. It is next to impossible not to conclude that the wretched public schools are, despite their wretchedness, going to be defended by entrenched interests. I do not blame the teachers' unions for the failure of the schools - as I say, those reasons are many and various. But, I do fault them, grievously, for their obstruction of efforts to fix the problems. This is a type of corruption that is, in its way, worse than the petty corruption of which Congressman Rangel is, or former Congressman Ney was, accused. Those men allegedly lined their pockets or the pockets of their friends. The corruption that prevents education reform from happening causes real, demonstrable harm in the lives of tens of thousands of children.

In his post, Professor Garnett referred to the "government schools" rather than the "public schools." He and I are in complete agreement that the government is in the service of the public, that the society is bigger and broader than the government, that all of us, not just those in government, have a responsibility to improve schools. But, I worry that there are those - the Tea Party crowd comes to mind - that will seize on the distinction Garnett makes for their own nefarious purposes. There are those, some of them are

running for Congress on the GOP slate, who see government as evil, and will seize on the distinction Garnett makes to advance their cause. I almost hope someone does so that Professor Garnett can disabuse them of the notion that Catholic social thought endorses the kind of hare-brained libertarian, government is evil, ideas espoused by some in the Tea Party. He could make the case with greater insight and intelligence than I can.

None of us is responsible for the mis-use of our words. Garnett rarely writes an unclear sentence, which is a rare achievement among bloggers if not law professors. I do not know if I would characterize Zuckerberg's gift as a "mistake" because I believe that the public schools can be reformed, especially when you have two no-nonsense politicians like Christie and Booker leading the charge. Both are well advised to consider how the Catholic schools do so much better with so much less than their public counterparts. And, wouldn't it be nice if some day, politicians of both political parties could recognize that Catholic schools are public in an important and vital way, providing a great service to the nation as well as to the Church. But, we have to make sure that we do so without encouraging the yahoos who hate government. Ronald Reagan famously said that government is not the solution, it's the problem. Whether he was right or wrong, the problem of government is ours and our collective failure to provide better public schools is a constant, ugly, almost unforgivable stain on progressive beliefs about the power of government to achieve the common good.

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