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Why the Anti-RC Ads are Good

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

A mailing from the Democratic Farm Labor Party in Minnesota, featuring a man in a Roman collar with a button that reads "Ignore the Poor," has become something of a cause celebre in conservative Catholic circles. "The DFL deliberately exploited Catholic imagery to make a political point," ranted Bill Donohue of the Catholic League. "Had they pictured an imam on the front of its mailing, the DFL wouldn't treat its critics so cavalierly. If the DFL wants to paint Hall as anti-poor, then do it. But don't do it by hijacking Catholic imagery. While the text is about Dan Hall, the teaser—that which gets the attention of the reader—is a Catholic-baiting stunt that paints priests as anti-poor."

My friend David Gibson has already pointed out the difficulty with this narrative. The mailing was about a Protestant minister who is a candidate for office in Minnesota. In fact, the mailing chides the minister for taking positions at odds with those favored by the Catholic Church. And, as Gibson points out, it is the Reverend-candidate Dan Hall who raised the religion issue in the campaign.

Another mailing has now caught the attention of Father Zuhlsdorf. It shows an gothic-looking altar with a crucifix (the give-away) flanked by red and white signs that say "Vote!?" This mailing, too, according to Zuhlsdorf is offensive: "These are anti-Catholic attack ads, pure and simple."

Donohue. Zuhlsdorf. Relax. These ads are a win for Catholics. The ad-maker needed to find a way to visually represent religion in American culture and he or she chose us. A Roman collar. A gothic altar. A crucifix. These are not Calvinist symbols. And, they are not being invoked to "demonize" Catholicism, they are being used to represent religion.

As I write this morning, I am in Lynchburg, Virginia, hometown of the Rev. Jerry Falwell. In the 1980s, Falwell succeeded in changing the face of religion in American public life. Before him, the most famous

clerics in the public square were mainstream Protestants and Catholic priests. Reinhold Niebuhr had profoundly affected post-war views on fighting communism. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had led the civil rights movement. Father Bob Drinan had been prominent in the anti-war movement and become a member of Congress. The Berrigan brothers were in the headlines.

Falwell became the face of Christianity in America, leading previously disinterested fundamentalists boldly into the political life of the nation. He was the man on the cover of the news weeklies. He was the minister whom Ronald Reagan called to seek his support for the nomination of Sandra Day O'Connor to the Supreme Court. Falwell was the man the Republicans turned to for benediction at their national convention. Falwell did not ride the conservative wave in American politics, he helped generate that wave. By the time he died, Falwell was the most recognizable clergyman in America.

But, in 2010, in Minnesota, the ad-makers did not see fit to put a picture of a Protestant clergyman on their mailer, even though their political opponent is a Protestant clergyman. They chose distinctly Catholic images. The Church thinks in centuries, not in soundbites. And, anyone who pretends to the role of defender of the faith should know that winning in the culture is always more important than winning an election. We Catholics should be thrilled that someone who wanted to touch the chord of religion in America decided to touch our symbols.

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