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Episcopal Failure in Phoenix

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Bishop Thomas Olmsted has ordered St. Joseph Hospital to cease calling itself Catholic because it failed to abide by a series of ultimatums he issued previously. As well, the hospital chapel will no longer be able to reserve the Blessed Sacrament on premise nor hold Masses there.

I wrote about this mess earlier this week. I am glad to see that at least today the bishop mentioned God and not just canon law.

The decision comes after negotiations between Bishop Olmsted and Catholic Healthcare West, which runs the hospital in question. None of us knows what went on in those negotiations but if the bishop's public statements are any guide, it was less of a discussion than an interrogation.

We know something else about the entire sad episode. It represents a failure on Olmsted's part of the highest order. When discussions like these end up being conducted by press conference and in the pages of the local newspaper, the local bishop has failed to lead.

Giving ultimatums is not leadership. Giving ultimatums is what those who have failed to lead resort to in desperation.

I have not dismissed the bishop's concerns about the abortion, direct or indirect depending on whom you talk to, that occurred at St. Joseph's Hospital.

In my own life, when I find myself in murky moral waters, I find it especially helpful to be able to turn to the Church's moral laws for guidance. This is not abstract for me: When my mother was dying, the guidance of the ethical board at the Catholic nursing home brought great peace of mind to me and my father as they guided us through the Church's teachings and explained what could and could not be done

to ease her final weeks.

For all I know, the hospital administrators were wrong to approve the procedure that occurred in late 2009. But I can scarcely think of how a local bishop could have handled that situation worse than the way Olmsted has handled it.

If the hospital did not know what to do, and chose wrongly, that is the bishop's failing as a teacher. If they ignored his teaching, that is probably because he failed to sanctify. Now, he exerts his duty to govern in a way that is not just clumsy but scandalous.

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