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Catholic Identity: Real & Imagined

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Distinctly Catholic

The release of letters between Archbishop Timothy Dolan, President of the USCCB, and Sister Carol Keehan, DC, CEO of the Catholic Health Association, shows how these two Church leaders grapple with the issue of Catholic Identity in the setting of a hospital and the issues that Catholic health care entail. The recent speech by Bishop Gerald Kicanas to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities also deals with the subject of Catholic Identity, there in the context of higher education. Last week, at the inauguration of Catholic University's new president, the conversations all circled around the students' and faculty's excitement to see how a layman would extend and further the restructures Catholic identity of the place, achieved by his predecessor Bishop David O'Connell. Everyone it seems is talking about Catholic Identity it seems.

What is this Catholic Identity? First, let us say what it is not. Those conservatives associated with, say, the Cardinal Newman Society, or who write for certain conservative Catholic blogs, believe that Catholic identity essentially means conformity to certain political positions regarding abortion, same sex marriage and other so-called "non-negotiable" items. You will recall that the Cardinal Newman Society - the most unhappily and inappropriately named society on the planet - led to the opposition to the University of Notre Dame's decision to invite President Obama to campus and award him an honorary doctorate of laws. Then, they said, you can have him speak, but no honors for anyone who is pro-abortion. Yesterday, the Cardinal Newman Society was upset that Georgetown University hosted a talk by a leading gay rights activist, although there was no conferral of any honors and his appearance was part of a series of lectures with public policy advocates.

The worldview of the Cardinal Newman Society, Father Zuhlsdorf, the American Catholic, et al., is a shockingly cramped one when it comes to Catholic identity, a checklist approach to the spiritual life (must do this, mustn't do that) that is semi-Pelagian, and a censorious stance that is precisely the opposite of

what one would want in an educator. Or an evangelist. Just go to the Newman Society website and look at all the finger-pointing. Is that attractive to anyone?

Compare it with the closing passages of Bishop Kicanas's speech to the educators where he gave examples of what Catholic identity looks like in real life. Kicanas noted Notre Dame's sending teachers to poor communities, a project that grew out of a study at the university about the hurdles to Latino access to education. He noted the efforts of Boston College to help the Archdiocese of Boston strengthen its parochial schools. Kicanas detailed the work of Catholic Relief Services with Catholic colleges, especially at Villanova University, on behalf of the suffering people of the Sudan. Instances, all, of Catholic identity. But, check out the website of the Newman Society and the articles about anything positive are few and far between.

Sister Carol Keehan is a walking example of Catholic identity. During the kerfuffle last year over health care, not once did she question the bishops' right and duty to teach authoritatively on subjects of faith and morals. In the mess in Phoenix, she has never questioned the fact that the local bishop is the final interpreter of the ethical directives that govern Catholic hospitals. In both instances, the question was similar: How do the Church's teachings apply to this concrete set of circumstances? Sister Carol never said abortion funding was okay. She did not say, as some of her conservative critics charged, that we should put up with a little bit of abortion funding in order to secure universal health care. All she said ? and she was right ? is that the new law did not contain abortion funding. That is a statement of fact, not a statement of faith or morals. Ditto in Phoenix where the issue is how Catholic teachings and clinical assessments cohere. Both Bishop Olmsted and Sister Carol abhor abortion. The disagreement between the bishop and the hospital was about whether the abortion in question was direct and prohibited or indirect and allowed.

More importantly, I suspect that the main reason the comments of Archbishop Dolan and Cardinal Francis George regarding CHA and Sister Carol are so favorable is because they can see what some critics cannot: Under Sister Carol's guidance, those hospitals in CHA pursue their Catholic identity in many ways. For example, Catholic Healthcare West, which runs the hospital in Phoenix, is doing groundbreaking work with women facing crisis pregnancies, interfacing with social services, and helping women choose to keep their child. That is more pro-life than voting the GOP ticket or putting a bumper sticker on your car.

In our Church, there are things that are not permitted. There are other things which simply don't fit into a Catholic weltanschauung. I get that. But, the Catholicism-as-censoriousness crowd needs to understand not only that Catholic identity is a richer, more fecund thing than they acknowledge, but that their vision of the Church is so unattractive, it fails the Church's first task, evangelization. Sister Carol does not fail in that task. Many Catholic colleges and universities do not fail in that task. Just because they disagree with the judgments of the Cardinal Newman Society or get a blast from Father Zuhlsdorf does not make anyone a bad Catholic.

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