

Abp Dolan on Subsidiarity and Solidarity

Michael Sean Winters | May. 26, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

Last week, after Congressman Paul Ryan released his correspondence with Archbishop Timothy Dolan, some conservatives claimed the President of the USCCB was, in effect, endorsing the Ryan plan. This was obviously not true, but sometimes only a headline gets read and some headlines had more spin than others.

Now, Archbishop Dolan, having ginned up some broader interest in Catholic social teaching, follows his letter to Ryan with [a column at his blog](#) [1] on the website of the Archdiocese of New York. Here he reiterates what he wrote to Ryan, namely, that one of the Catholic principles Ryan cited, subsidiarity, must always be linked to another such principle, solidarity.

Dolan also goes on to examine how the Church and her pastors interact with the political realm. He writes:

One side usually blesses us when we preach the virtue of fiscal responsibility, the civil rights of the unborn, the danger of government-tampering with the definition of marriage, and the principle of subsidiarity ? that is, that the smaller units in our society, such as family, neighborhood, Church, and volunteer organizations, are usually preferable to big government in solving social ills.

Yet this same side then often cringes when we defend workers, speak on behalf of the rights of the undocumented immigrant, and remind government of the moral imperative to protect the poor.

The other side enjoys quoting us when we extol universal health care, question the death penalty, demand that every budget and program be assessed on whether it will help or hurt those in need, encourage international aid, and promote the principle of solidarity, namely, society?s shared duties to one another, especially the poor and struggling . . .

. . . and then these same folks bristle when we defend the rights of parents in education, those of the baby in the womb and grandma on her death bed, insist that America is at her best when people of faith have a respected voice in the public square, defend traditional marriage, and remind government that it has no right to intrude in Church affairs, but does have the obligation to protect the rights of conscience.

So, we bishops get both blessed and blasted, a friend or foe of bloggers, pundits, and politicians, depending on what the issue is.

This sounds remarkably akin to Cardinal Bernardin?s famous formulation: ?seamless garment.? That phrase, for reasons I simply do not understand, seems to be verboten. It should not be. Not because it keeps the Church from appearing to be the chaplain of either partisan cause, although it also does that. But, more importantly, it indicates that the Church?s teachings are rooted in Christ. They are all, you will pardon the expression, non-negotiable. Or as Pope Benedict wrote in *Caritas in Veritate*, ?[C]larity is not served by certain abstract subdivisions of the Church?s social doctrine, which apply categories to Papal social teaching that are extraneous to it?there is a single teaching, consistent and at the same time ever new?.

Of course, in practice, certain politicians are effectively barred from Catholic venues and others are not. I understand that concern for life is foundational in a way that any given social program is not. But, as the debate about Ryan?s budget shows, and as Dolan affirms, the Church?s commitment to the poor is also foundational. We can debate about how to achieve greater subsidiarity and solidarity, just as we can debate strategies for

ending the scourge of abortion. Overturning Roe will not be enough, indeed, politically, overturning Roe might set back the pro-life movement unless we have first plowed the cultural vineyard to care for women facing crisis pregnancies and afford them the means and the support to keep their children and avoid illegal abortion mills. Given the increased appreciation for the unicity of Church teaching, the bishops are well advised to look at the differing ways they treat those who pick and choose among the Church's teachings. And, need I point out, that in today's political alignments, the only people who genuinely embrace the vision set forth in *Caritas in Veritate* are pro-life Democrats.

Nonetheless, Dolan's post goes a long way towards clearing up some of the confusion that was sown by media reports of his exchange of letters with Cong. Ryan. He may not have used the phrase "seamless garment", but that is what he is talking about. The good Archbishop of New York has reminded Catholics that our teachings come whole, that they constitute a "single teaching, consistent and at the same time ever new" and that they are rooted not in our beliefs about markets, but in our beliefs about Jesus Christ.

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[1] <http://blog.archny.org/>