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Creating space for intellectual debate

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 26, 2011

Washington is a city where people like to be busy and, even more, like to be seen to be busy. An invitation to a luncheon or a dinner is never met with a simple yes or no, but with "Let me check my calendar." In the metro, in the elevator, even at the dinner table of a restaurant, people are buried in their BlackBerries. "Activity suggests a life filled with purpose," said Captain von Trapp in "The Sound of Music," and Washington took his instruction to heart.

But, on a recent afternoon, a dozen or so scholars met around a conference table at The Catholic University of America's Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies to discuss a chapter of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. There were a couple of philosophy professors, a sociologist, someone from the evangelization office of the archdiocese. There was even a rocket scientist, a former NASA scientist who went on to teach at the Naval Academy.

One professor gave a summation of the chapter, and then the group engaged in a conversation about the contents, the relevance of themes to contemporary issues, issues that seemed obscure -- the nature of prudential judgment, the history of certain economic and political concepts. Sometimes the conversation got heated. At all times everyone was deeply engaged, wrestling with the tradition and trying to discern what it means for us today.

The symposium was held by the local chapter of Pax Romana. The organization began in the 19th century in Europe, as an intellectual apostolate to spread the church's social teachings as Western culture grappled with the industrialization of societies, universal education, and political democracy. It served as a proto-think tank for the Christian Democratic movement in the 20th century.

One of the group's chaplains in Italy was Giovanni Battista Montini, later Pope Paul VI. Illustrating some of the ideological diversity found within the organization, in Poland Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II) was a chaplain, and in Peru liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez was a chaplain also. Pax Romana played a central role at the original United Nations conference, especially in getting the new organization to set up working relationships with officially recognized nongovernmental organizations. Pax Romana's New York chapter continues to be active in sponsoring symposiums with the U.N.

In the early 1990s Joe Holland got a call from the group's U.S. leader, inviting him to join the board and breathe new life into the organization. Holland has a long resumé of lay activism. He was founding director of the Pallottine Institute for Lay Leadership and Apostolate Research at Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J. He helped found the American Catholic Lay Network, which brought 250 laypeople to the Synod on the Laity, and he was a research fellow at the Center for Concern, a scholarly institute founded jointly by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Jesuits. Needless to say, sloth is not one of Holland's vices.

Intellectual sloth is also not among Holland's sins. A conversation with him is like a roller coaster, going from the current activities of Pax Romana to an analysis of the early Industrial Age in the twinkling of an eye. In 2000, he became president of Pax Romana USA, and set about organizing the databases, getting stationery, and filing incorporation papers. When Holland moved to Miami, where he teaches philosophy at St. Thomas University, the organization's center of gravity went with him.

"Pax Romana took on a different character. Previously, it had focused very much on the United Nations, but because Miami is such a crossroads, we began to develop deeper relationships with people from the Caribbean and Latin America," he said. Holland also wanted to shift the group away from being an advocacy organization and back to its original intellectual charism.

Pax Romana's efforts to evangelize the intellectual world mostly fall into three categories. First, it hosts symposiums like the one in Washington, getting intellectuals together to study the church's social teachings. The New York chapter sponsors several per year, and these are well-attended by U.N. diplomats, including the Vatican's ambassador, Archbishop Francis Chullikatt.

Secondly, the group has begun mentoring university students. One of its most successful pilot programs has been at St. Thomas Law School, which now offers a course, team-taught by Holland and others, titled "The United Nations, Global Ethics, and Catholic Social Teaching." Students who take the course are eligible for an internship at the U.N.'s legal affairs offices. To date, more than 30 students have taken a semester there, working with different countries and organizations.

The third area of Pax Romana's activity is in research and publishing. It recently published a book by British economist Angus Sibley, The "Poisoned Spring" of Economic Libertarianism, which I reviewed on my blog, Distinctly Catholic. The book is a bracing rebuttal to the ideas that underlay much of the tea party economic ideas being propagated in Washington these days.

Pax Romana is well on its way to becoming a significant player in the debates that will shape the intellectual climate in this country. And, by bringing the church's social teachings to the fore, getting past the sloganeering that so often characterizes debates in the church, and exploring the rich and varied traditions of Catholicism, its intellectual seeds may yet yield a bountiful harvest.

Michael Sean Winters writes Distinctly Catholic, a daily blog on the NCR Web site. See it at **NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic** [1].]

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