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Weigel Attacks Church's Social Magisterium (Again!)

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

George Weigel's voice never carries deep, because he has long since abandoned any claim to depth of analysis, but it carries far. His column is widely syndicated to Catholic newspapers through the *Denver Catholic Register*. Just so, Weigel's voice should be countered when he writes something that is offensive to the Church's social magisterium which he claims to champion. His column this week is one more piece of noxious evidence that Weigel has simply become a partisan hack of the highest order. Let us examine some of his claims in this latest piece of agitprop.

Weigel writes: "[The social welfare state] is dying, in both Europe and the United States, because it is unaffordable." Unaffordable? Tax rates are at historic lows. The tax code is so Byzantine, it requires millions of hours of non-productive work plumbing its depths, from lobbyists who must get special tax breaks inserted into the code to the army of lawyers and accountants needed to harvest those special breaks. I am all for tax simplification. The suggestion that we cannot impose a higher tax burden on America's wealthiest citizens, whose wealth has expanded exponentially even while wages for most Americans are stagnant or falling, is ridiculous in the extreme.

It is true that taxing the very wealthy will do not enough to provide a secure financial future for our federal entitlement programs. The greatest need is to restrain rising health care costs, a need which the Affordable Care Act takes important steps towards achieving. Surely, Mr. Weigel is aware that the exploding costs of health care account for most of the long-term danger to entitlement programs. And, surely he is aware that those costs in America far outstrip the costs of all of our foreign competitors. Those nations have lower health care costs precisely because they have robust government-run health care systems. The crisis in Greece has many causes, but health care costs is not one of them. The global economic downturn, excessive pension that have not been adjusted to account for longer life-spans, and, most especially, the inability to collect tax revenue are the three principal causes of the Greek meltdown.

In Weigel's broad brush, Greece's problems are America's problems, but that is not the case.

Weigel writes: "The social welfare state is also dying because it is grossly inefficient." I suppose that claim depends largely on what one means by inefficient. The New England Journal of Medicine issued a new report yesterday that indicates that when Medicaid is expanded to more poor people, fewer of those people die. The New York Times has the story here. So, in casting aspersions on "the social welfare state" does Mr. Weigel mean to suggest that Medicaid expansion that saves lives or, in other words, pro-life Medicaid expansion, is "inefficient"? Compared to what? Without Medicaid, poor people would not have any insurance at all, they would be less likely to get needed care, and more of them would die. Of course, such people are probably Democrats, so maybe they don't count.

I also wonder why anyone would suggest that Social Security is inefficient when its value has been demonstrated anew during the recession, a recession you will recall that was not caused by the expense or inefficiencies of the social welfare state but by risky investment schemes by those super-rich people Weigel is so loathe to tax. (Why interrupt a gambler when he is on a run?) Poverty rates have increased, as they do in all recessions, but poverty among the elderly has not exploded in comparable fashion. Why? Social Security. Indeed, Mr. Weigel would do well to consult the "Poverty and Income" page at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities which has many studies that show how successfully a variety of government-run social safety net programs work.

Weigel writes: "Rather than expending fruitless energies defending the social welfare state as we know it?" in the first few months of 2012, the bishops' conference (as represented by its domestic policy committee) issued letters urging renewed or expanded funding for some 20 federal social welfare programs? the Catholic Church in the United States should be at the forefront of exploring the path beyond the welfare state, stressing the moral and cultural dimensions of that necessary journey." He does not specify which parts of the social welfare state he would like to eliminate. During a recession, does he think it is a good idea to cut food stamps? Congress and the Obama administration recently agreed to sustain funding for the Opportunity scholarships that help low-income children attend Catholic and other private schools in Washington, D.C. Does Mr. Weigel wish to cut off that federal largesse? As mentioned earlier, the small business owner featured in Mr. Romney's latest ad benefited from over \$1 million in loans and loan guarantees from federally funded programs that help small businesses get started: Should those programs be cut? Mr. Weigel was born in 1951, so he will be eligible for Medicare soon, and I am guessing the chief financial officer at the Ethics and Public Policy Center can explain to Weigel the impact on that organization's bottom line if it could not count on most of their older and former fellows and staff being able to enroll on what is, after all, "socialized medicine."

Weigel also fails to point out that the letters issued by the USCCB asking for the strengthening of essential government programs that assist the poor were part of a larger, interdenominational campaign called the "Circle of Protection." Among other radical organizations in the Circle of Protection, surely some of them with a disturbing familiarity with Saul Alinsky, we find the Salvation Army and the National Association of Evangelicals. His attempt to link the issue of social safety programs with the dangers of a "secular state" confuses distinct issues. I will not guess at his motives " but you can!

The part that really peeves, however, is Weigel's opening claim. He writes: "Throughout the post-Vatican II years, the U.S. bishops' conference has typically defended the welfare state and not infrequently urged its expansion. Everyone familiar with the situation knows that this has had far more to do with the political predilections of certain conference staff members than with the settled judgment of the American episcopate? or with a careful application of the principles of Catholic social doctrine. But things are changing." Not "everyone familiar with the situation" would agree with this claim that the stances articulated by the bishops is largely the result of the bishops' staff's "political predilections." But, am I

the only one who thinks it strange for someone like Weigel, writing in a newspaper owned by a bishop, to suggest that the bishops are not really wrong on economics, because their views are different from the views of the staff who draft documents in their name. Does this not suggest that the bishops are either without wits or nerve enough to instruct their own staff? This is an old canard of Catholic neo-cons ? the staff make them do it! ? when they cannot persuade the bishops to follow them into the arms of the Ayn Rand-inspired economists and politicians Mr. Weigel has decided to champion. It is bunk.

I also wish to issue a challenge to Mr. Weigel. Could he find the time to write an article on some issue on which he disagrees with today's Republican Party? Where is his voice on the issue of immigration? I was not shy about criticizing the Obama administration over the HHS mandates. I understand quite clearly which Kingdom has first claim on my allegiance. Can the same be said by Mr. Weigel? He prates on and on about the virtues and values of democratic capitalism but I seem to have missed his article attacking these voter suppression laws enacted in so many GOP states with the obvious, and in some cases the expressed, aim of making it more difficult for poor people to vote. What does Mr. Weigel think about torture, an intrinsically evil act? And he considers leftie Catholics ?cafeteria Catholics?? Please.

I also have a challenge to the U.S. bishops. I suspect that their commitment to programs, including government programs, that help the poor has nothing to do with the political preferences of the USCCB staff. I suspect it has more to do with more than 120 years of explicit teachings by a string of pontiffs and by the bishops of the U.S. themselves. I suspect the bishops' commitment is rooted, ultimately, in the 25th Chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew. I challenge the bishops to decline to publish Mr. Weigel's columns until he publicly affirms that he is willing to submit his intellect and will to the Church's teaching he is currently so keen to attack. He writes: ?Catholic social doctrine is a tradition of moral realism: it takes facts seriously. And the increasing burden of the evidence is that the social welfare state as we have known it is dying?and in fact deserves to die.? No, sir. The burden of evidence merely shows that you are publicly dissenting from the teachings of the Church.

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