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"Please Let It Be Ryan"\

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

The responses to my Veepstakes column yesterday from a variety of progressive Catholic friends was unanimous: "Please let it be Congressman Paul Ryan." I am less sanguine about the consequences that would attend Romney's choosing Ryan, and I am always mindful of the adage "Be Careful What You Wish For." But, I do think selecting Ryan would clarify the election as nothing else could.

Already, a host of conservative opinion-makers, from the *National Review* to the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, are pushing Romney to select Ryan. They want this to be "a big election over big issues" and Cong. Ryan's willingness to directly tackle the issue of entitlements seems like just the kind of "big issue" the *WSJ* editors want tackled.

Mr. Romney, of course, has already heaped praise on the Ryan budget plan. But, words of praise are not the same thing as standing next to Ryan for the remaining 10 weeks of the campaign. If Romney chooses Ryan, he is choosing, not offering words of support for, his budget plans. And the USCCB has already stated clearly that the Ryan budget fails its three part definition of a moral budget, in that it fails to protect the poor, does not promote human dignity, and does not advance the common good. Ryan is a likable fellow, and a devoted Catholic, but if the leadership of the USCCB has to choose between Ryan on the one side and 120 years of explicit papal social teaching on the other, that is not really a difficult choice: The bishops pick Leo, Pius XI, John XXIII, Vatican II, Paul VI, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, none of whom anyone can even conceive of endorsing the kind of deep cuts in social programs "all without any replacement policies" that assist the poor and the vulnerable. Even conservative Catholics who tend to care more about the pro-life issue than anything else have to contend with the anti-life consequences of cuts in Medicaid and other programs.

Many of the white working class voters Romney needs are Catholics. The Romney campaign has just

released a new ad that is aimed directly at Catholic voters. The ad reprises Romney's speech in Poland praising Pope John Paul II, and then cleverly shows an old photo of the late pontiff embracing Lech Walesa, followed by a photo of Romney with Walesa. It is gauzy and imprecise, but that doesn't mean it won't work. Millions of Catholics have fond memories of Pope John Paul II, especially his courageous struggle against Parkinson's Disease. The ad focuses on the issue of religious liberty, and Obama has no one but himself to blame that this card is in the GOP's deck this year.

But Team Romney also released another ad that rehashes the old "Welfare Queen" images that were once a staple of the GOP's efforts to reach out to George Wallace Democrats. Wallace Democrats in the 60s and 70s were not all in the South. Wallace did quite well with white working class voters in Michigan and Maryland, winning both primaries in 1976, the same workers Obama has consistently had difficulty with. Wallace came to renounce his earlier segregationist stance and his trafficking in race-inflected political populism. Sadly, Team Romney is evident quite willing to still play that card.

The response to Romney's anti-poor people ad was quick. "Recent advertisements and statements from the campaign of Governor Romney demonize families in poverty and reflect woeful ignorance about the challenges faced by tens of millions of American families in these tough economic times," NETWORK president Sister Simone Campbell stated in a press release. "We are all God's children and equal in God's eyes. Efforts to divide us by class or score political points at the expense of the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters reveal the worst side of our country's politics." Sr. Campbell invited Romney to come and spend some time with the sisters as they minister to the poor.

The invitation was echoed by the Franciscan Action Network. Their press release inviting Mr. Romney to spend time with the poor also explicitly drew the link between the anti-poor people ad and the prospect of a Ryan Veep selection:

Beyond these messages, the deeper problem is the budget proposed by Rep. Paul Ryan and supported by Gov. Romney. This proposal balances the budget on the backs of the poor with cuts to Medicaid, Head Start, Pell Grants and other vital programs. Patrick Carolan, Executive Director of FAN said, "With the political conversation now on ensuring that low-income people are working, the most blatant affront is that the Ryan Budget actually cuts job training programs for low-income people." The Campaign to Invest in America's Workforce (CIAW) estimates that the Ryan Budget would cut funding for education and job training programs by more than \$16 billion (22 percent), including for the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) programs.

As we saw in the last week's of June, the "Nuns on the Bus" campaign, which took direct aim at Cong. Ryan's budget, got significantly more media coverage than the bishops' "Fortnight for Freedom" so Romney's campaign may be misjudging the temperature of the Catholic electorate.

I continue to be amazed at the lackluster Romney campaign. I am not sure why, the weeks after the unemployment rate ticked up a point, they are running ads on religious freedom. But, if the next unemployment numbers continue to be gloomy up until election day, I do not discount the possibility of a Romney win. So, while I understand why progressive Catholics relish the chance to demonstrate how deeply at odds the Ryan budget is with traditional Catholic social teaching, I repeat the caveat: Be Careful What You Wish For. If the election were tomorrow, and Romney were to win, he would not have much of a mandate, beyond repealing the Affordable Care Act, which would be bad enough. But, if he picks Ryan, and if they win, he really would have a mandate to push through the Ryan budget with all its devastating consequences.

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