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The first presidential debate in review

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Distinctly Catholic

Zzzzzzz. Zzzzzzz. About 30 minutes into last night's presidential debate, I found myself consumed with one over-riding wish: That there might be a 'Law & Order' rerun on another channel. Alas, bored though I was, not even I had a sufficient lack of citizenship to turn to the rerun of 'Two and A Half Men' that was showing.

There is no doubt that Mr. Romney won the debate. He was the more energized of the two candidates, he repeated his key themes, especially his attack on the president's economic record, with crispness, and most importantly, he parried President Obama's criticisms effectively, albeit deceptively. I believe Romney that he will never raise taxes on the middle class, but his repeated suggestion that his economic proposals do not amount to more trickle down economics is a simple lie.

The strange thing was that Obama did not pounce, or punch back, or do much of anything except appear like he was aggrieved by the necessity of taking an hour and one half out of his day to explain to the American people why he deserves a second term. He needed to challenge Gov. Romney? 'Governor, you seem to resist my characterization of the 20 percent tax cuts for the super-rich you have proposed. I have to ask you to be specific because it seems to me that when you have someone making \$10 million a year, and you cut their tax rate by 20 percent, you just gave that person a tax cut of about \$700,000. Now, you may think you can close enough loopholes to make that money back, but there are not enough loopholes on the planet to cover that large of a tax cut.'

I was bewildered that the president did not discuss, in detail, the 'loopholes' that would be on the table. The other day, Mr. Romney suggested that he would limit the amount of deductions one can claim for charitable deductions. This would not affect those who throw a twenty into the collection basket, but I wonder what some of our bishops think of this idea. They are the ones who have to sit down with big

donors and ask for large donations. I know several rich people who are devoted to the Church whose desire to give is rooted in their sense of commitment, but I am guessing that a certain, not negligible number of big donors would think twice if there was a limit on the tax deductibility of their donations. Even more shocking was that the president did not talk about the home mortgage interest deduction, agree that it should be rescinded on second homes for rich vacationers, but also point out that the home mortgage interest deduction provides critical assistance to middle class citizens trying to buy a home, it is part of the American Dream.

A similar lack of rhetorical agility afflicted Obama when discussing an issue that should be a slam dunk for him, Medicare. One commentator liked the president's opener: "If you're 55, listen up." Surely, after listening to Mr. Romney say at least twice that his proposals would not affect current beneficiaries or those close to retirement, the correct response from Mr. Obama would have been: "Governor, you know, I have spent time talking to a lot of seniors, not just the ones who are wealthy enough to donate to our campaigns. And, they are not selfish. They are not going to sign off on the destruction of Medicare for their children and their grandchildren so long as they are not affected. And, they would be affected. The AARP?."

President Obama was even weaker when it came to the discussion about the role of government. Here is where his rhetoric should soar. Instead, he was flat. He did not connect the role of government to Mr. Romney's comment about the 47% of Americans whom Romney thinks are a bunch of moochers. He did not talk about the role of government in creating the infrastructure that made the post-World War II economic boom possible. He did not mention the GI bill. He did not defend entitlements in the way they can and should be defended. "You know, Mr. Romney, you and I may disagree about this, because you seem to say the word 'entitlement' as if it was a cussword, but I believe that if you have lived in this country, worked your whole life, raised your family, played by the rules, paid taxes all that time, yes, you are entitled to Social Security and you are entitled to health care as a guaranteed benefit not a voucher."

I have raised this worry before about President Obama and, indeed, all politicians. Understandably, they surround themselves with the best and the brightest, people who are exceedingly successful. But, just so, President Obama never, in his daily activities, encounters someone who is really worried about their retirement, or about paying for their kids' college, or about the mortgage. The people he interacts with are all privileged in one way or another. For them, and sadly now for him, these issues are abstract. It was telling that it was Romney not Obama who last night spoke about individuals who were having a tough time right out of the box, at the very beginning of the debate, and Obama who stayed in wonkville.

I said before the debate that Mr. Romney needed to have the president slip on a banana peel last night, and that did not happen. But, Romney's performance was certainly impressive enough that he stopped the bleeding of his campaign and gave new hope to his friends that he might yet pull this off. Obama could have put the entire election away last night, and he didn't. He not only has to do a better job defending his record, he needs to link his policies to his vision for the country and call out Mr. Romney when Romney dances around the implications of his proposals. That is not the moderator's job, that is the candidate's job and last night, Obama failed to do his job. I just wonder how many people had switched to reruns halfway through a debate that was so dull it was like watching the wallpaper age.

Note to Readers: I am on a panel this morning at the Religion Newswriters Conference and consequently will not be posting further today.

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