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Election 2012: Subsidiarity

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 15, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

It was not likely that Pope Pius XI, who reigned from 1922 until 1939, would have even a bit part in the 2012 presidential election. But, last spring, Congressman Paul Ryan brought up the principle of subsidiarity to defend his budget proposals in a speech at Georgetown, and the Catholic blogosphere took note. Pius XI?s encyclical Quadragesimo Anno, in 1931, highlighted the importance of subsidiarity in the social teaching of the Church.

In fact, the idea of subsidiarity is central to the entire political debate this year. It usually is more amorphous in discussion than Pius, and given the polarized electorate, more of a reflex than a reasoned argument, but the presidential campaign nonetheless has focused essentially on the role of government and its relationship to society in countless ways. The fight over the Affordable Care Act, the role of government regulations of the financial sector and the environment, the HHS contraception mandate, and whether we want ?trickle-down economics? or ?trickle-down government,? all intuit ideas that Pius articulated with great clarity, greater clarity than that found in the stump speeches of most contemporary politicians.

Ryan equated the idea of subsidiarity with federalism, which was hogwash. Federalism is the idea that political power must be vested in different actors so as engender competition among them and thus prevent tyranny. Subsidiarity ? the Latin root comes from the word for assistance or help ? is the idea that the appropriate level of society should be engaged in helping both individuals and the common good flourish. Subsidiarity further holds that because the human person is the center of all political, social and economic decision-making, the best policy solutions are those that are deeply personal. Consequently, the most basic societal unit, the family, should be free to solve those problems it can. When the family can?t solve a given problem or issue, then intermediate social actors ? guilds, unions, churches ? step in. Finally, government must step in when these lower level social actors are unable to achieve the conditions necessary to fulfill individual flourishing or the common good. While some conservative Catholics tend to see subsidiarity as a one way street, urging less ?big government,? in fact, subsidiarity is a two way street, demanding government intervention when needed.

Pius?s ideas were not sui generis. He drew heavily on the writings of Pope Leo XIII who, in turn, drew heavily on the writings of the Jesuit philosopher Luigi Taparelli, who led a revival of Thomistic thought in the nineteenth century against both the emerging, aggressively secular liberal state manifested in the Kulturkampf, and the reactionary monarchism we associate with de Maistre. Then, the fight was largely over education, with which the Church had long concerned itself, but was now coming under the exclusive control of the state. Taparelli, Leo and then Pius reached back to St. Thomas Aquinas?s thought to propose a more organic understanding of society, one in which all the parts of society work together within their respective sphere, and the state does not encroach on the prerogatives of the smaller social units. (A similar development was occurring in Calvinist thought where Abraham Kuyper developed the idea of ?sphere sovereignty.?) The state has a role, to be clear, but that role is not to subsume into itself all the work of society.

In our own time, the most obvious policy initiative to embody the principle of subsidiarity has been the Faith-based initiative begun by President George W. Bush and continued by President Obama. The idea behind the initiative is to empower local groups, including religious ones, to help address social problems, rather than adopt

a one-size-fits-all federal approach. Interestingly, one of the chief proponents of Bush?s ?compassionate conservatism,? Marvin Olasky, ended up vigorously opposing Bush?s policy when it did not result in a federal retrenchment from social policy, which he desired. But, Bush got it right. When societies were largely rural and agrarian, private, local charity could provide the assistance needed by those who were down on their luck. In our time, only the state has the resources to address the problem of poverty in an industrial and post-industrial age.

But, how should those resources be applied? And, if we are going to engage private, and religious, agencies to carry out social action with government funds, how to balance the autonomy and integrity of those religious agencies with the government?s desire to achieve a given policy outcome? This is at the heart of the HHS mandate: Did the Obama administration overstep, failing to recognize that Catholic schools, hospitals and charities have an integrity and autonomy that must be respected, rooted as they are in Christian belief? It is undoubtedly true, as Bill Galston has said, that when Caesar gives money to God, it is not exactly yet God?s money. But, it is also true that just because a Catholic hospital or charity lives and functions in the secular public square, its work is not exactly yet secular. Here, I think, the Obama administration over-reached.

Congressman Ryan and his conservative Catholic friends also fail to recognize that both Leo and Pius were worried not only about the encroachments of aggressively secular government, but on the power of the financiers. John Courtney Murray captured some of the essence of subsidiarity when he wrote:

Leo XIII boldly took from the Enemy the truth that he had ? the principle that government, under the conditions of modern society, must take an active role in economic life?.Industrialism had wrought a progressive depersonalization of economic life. And the impersonality of the employer-employee relationship had, in turn, bred moral irresponsibility. A new ?master? has appeared ? the corporation. And, as the American aphorism had it, ?Corporations have neither bodies to be kicked nor souls to be damned.? They were seemingly immune from the restraints that conscience had imposed on the old ?master,? the individual, in an age where economic relationships were generally personal. The private conscience had ceased to be an effective means of social control. Therefore, the only alternative to the tyranny of socialism or the anatchy of economic liberalism was the growth of the public conscience and its expression through the medium of law and governmental act ? a medium whose impersonality matched the impersonality of the economic life into which it was thrust as a principle of order. On these grounds Leo took his stand for interventionism.

I do not doubt that Leo and Pius would find themselves explicitly supportive of universal health care, no problems pointing out that the market has demonstrably failed to secure this basic human right, and consequently, sanction the idea that the government has the right and duty to step in, even though they would allow a great deal of debate about the details ? and both would surely oppose the HHS mandate!

In Europe, Christian Democracy grew out of the teachings of Leo, Pius and Kuyper. In those countries, of course, much more was spent, and is spent, from the public treasury than has ever been spent in the U.S. Nonetheless, when the New Deal was being debated, some of its strongest champions were found within the Catholic Church. Msgr. John A. Ryan, dubbed the ?Right Reverend New Dealer? would certainly be appalled by the Affordable Care Act and by Dodd-Frank, but only because it took so long to enact them and that neither goes far enough! And when, oh, when, will Obama and his team stand up and defend the Affordable Care Act, pointing out that it is not a ?government takeover? ? although many of us which it had been. The ACA does not put government into the examining room between a patient and the doctor, it only opens the door to that examining room for millions of Americans who currently can?t afford to open that door.

Subsidiarity, then, cuts both ways. Against the Democrats and those separationist liberals who think the wall between Church and State can never be too high, subsidiarity argues that churches should play a vital role in society and government should encourage and enable that role. Subsidiarity also points out the hypocrisy of those separationist watchdogs who insist the wall between Church and State be high, but have been all too

willing to clamor over it to tell Notre Dame it must provide free contraception! But, against Ryan and the GOP, subsidiarity insists that government act to help society and that it is just as inhumane to be a slave to the all-powerful market as it is to the all-powerful state. Neither side can completely claim Pius for themselves and don?t you wish both parties would actually consider what Leo and Pius had to say. We just might find a path to a more just and humane society.

N.B. Much of this post was inspired by a book I am reading - "God's Economy" by Lew Daly - which is one of the best books I have read all year. I will be doing a full commentary on Daly's book in a future post.

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