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Moderate Mitt and the pro-life cause

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 18, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

My friend and colleague David Gibson has a very important story at Religion News Service [1]detailing how pro-life activists are dealing with the return of ?Moderate Mitt.? During the debate the other night, Romney backed away from his previous support of the Blunt Amendment which would have permitted any employer, not just religiously affiliated employers, to opt out of the HHS contraception mandate. The week before he told the Des Moines Register that he did not think anti-abortion legislation would be part of his agenda, a statement the campaign walked back subsequently. And, now the Romney campaign is running an ad that touts Romney?s support for contraception and his support for exceptions in cases of rape, incest or the life of the mother from his general opposition to abortion.

Marjorie Dannenfelser of the Susan B. Anthony List had this to say: ?It?s not just saying, ?Suck it up and move on ? vote for him,??Mitt Romney is a human being, and it?s important to be an asset and a friend to him, to say the best possible things about him. I know Romney?s weaknesses. He knows his weaknesses. Our role is to provide good counsel to this guy.? Of course, Ms. Dannenfelser did not adopt this pragmatic stance when it came to pro-life Democrats who supported the Affordable Care Act. Her organization led the often disingenuous campaign against Bart Stupak, Kathy Dahlkemper, Steve Driehaus and others. Why was she unwilling to ?say the best possible things? about them?

I wish to be clear here. The Catholic intellectual tradition does not primarily operate from a prophetic stance when it approaches politics. Our tradition emphasizes prudential judgment ? not as that phrase has been used by some Catholics trying to baptize laissez-faire economics ? the recognition that politics is the art of the possible. And, indeed, there is a case to be made for Mr. Romney on pro-life grounds. There are actions virtually any Republican would take by executive order on his first day in office that would reflect pro-life concerns. Having someone sensitive to pro-life issues at HHS would be a vast improvement over what we have now!

But, prudence requires taking the long view as well as the short. What effect would it have on the pro-life cause, its sense of integrity, if a candidate who consistently downplays his pro-life views to win the election turns around once elected and begins enacting policies the voters find more extreme from those promised during the campaign? No one likes having the wool pulled over their eyes. Mr. Romney?s willingness to bend the truth ? and I like to remind the Great Moral Theologian of Madison, Wisconsin, Bishop Morlino that lying is an intrinsic evil too ? could easily come back to damage the pro-life cause if he were to govern in a way that is inconsistent with the moderate image he has been trotting out.

During the Vice Presidential debate, Congressman Paul Ryan spoke very movingly ? and correctly ? about the source of his pro-life views. He spoke about seeing the ultrasound of his first child and calling her ?Bean? to this day because, at seven weeks, she looked like a bean. Our pro-life views are rooted, certainly, in our faith but they have ample confirmation from science and reason. The inconsistency of the pro-choice arguments are as obvious as day.

Except they aren?t obvious to many. And, this gets to the problem with the wink-wink approach these pro-life champions have adopted towards Mr. Romney. In politics, most issues can be negotiated: If I want to raise the

minimum wage by one dollar and some others do not want to raise it at all, we can compromise at 50 cents. These kinds of issues are perfect for our constitutional system which depends upon consensus and compromise and requires divergent interests to come together to achieve their political objectives. But, there are some issues that are categorical and democracy has a harder time with such issues. Race is such an issue. Our nation fought a great and terrible war to establish the principle that black men and women were people not property. And, in the 50s and 60s, the effort to defeat Jim Crow required more in the way of prophetic witness than prudential judgment. Abortion is a similar issue: Either the unborn child is a person or it is not. The question is categorical. Yet most Americans are deeply ambivalent about abortion. They think it should be legal but rare. Very strangely to my moral sensibilities, even before Roe, a majority of Americans supported abortion in cases of fetal abnormality. Having never met a ?normal? person and been deeply uplifted by my experiences working with the mentally handicapped, I do not understand why Americans have always thought this a justifiable reason for an abortion, but there it is. In short, I do think abortion is the kind of issue that requires people who are both willing to negotiate, achieve what can be achieved, cut deals when possible, but it also needs champions, politicians who are unwilling to trim their sails to court public opinion but intend to shape public opinion. John Carr has long said that we need to focus on making abortion unthinkable, not just illegal, and I think that?s right. I also think that Mr. Romney seems an unlikely person for engaging the culture on this issue in ways that cause the culture to view it differently. Indeed, if we in the pro-life community were to somehow achieve our goal of making abortion illegal before we have made it unthinkable, the backlash would horrible. That, too, is part of the prudential judgment required of voters.

In short, it is difficult not to conclude from Gibson?s piece that the pro-life community seems more interested today in electing a Republican than anything else, and that is a shame. Certainly, the issue will more likely change in both the law and in public consciousness if there were a more substantial pro-life presence in the Democratic Party. Yet, Dannanfelser and her crowd castigate pro-life Democrats even while they are arguing with their base to give Mr. Romney solme wiggle room. I watched the nasty invective hurled at Doug Kmiec four years ago and I see it hurled at Stephen Schneck this year, yet I can scarcely think of two men I know whose commitment to the pro-life is more deeply held. Ms. Dannanfelser needs to ask herself this question: Which takes more political courage? Mr. Romney telling his staff that he is unwilling to produce a television ad that seeks to portray his moderation on abortion or Professor Schneck going on national television and saying, as a Democrat, that he supports defunding Planned Parenthood? Which is better for the pro-life cause? A weathervane of a President or some vocal pro-life Democrats? Father Pavone of Priests-for-Life needs to ask himself these questions too, with an added question for extra credit: Isn?t there something a bit unseemly about clergy who are too worldly by half?

While we are talking about abortion, I also need to take issue with an op-ed by my friend Michael Peppard in the New York Times. [2]It is true that Paul Ryan has had to change his public stance on abortion, adopting the exceptions for rape and incest that his running mate supports. It is also true that these are intrinsic evils. And, it is true that the Church, correctly, recognizes that while the circumstance of rapes and incest are horrible in the extreme, the solution cannot be more horror and abortion is always a horror. All true and if Peppard's goal was to demonstrate how complicated these issues are, and that Catholic moral categories are never easily applied to secular legal matters, he succeeded. . But, voters can recognize the vast difference between Ryan?s position and President Obama?s and those of us in the pro-life community should not be obfuscating those differences. Peppard would have been on sounder political ground by pointing to the potentially dire consequences for the abortion rate should Mr. Ryan?s proposed cuts to Medicaid be enacted, or Obamacare overturned, robbing dozens of clinics that help women facing crisis pregnancies of the $250 million in funding Obamacare gave specifically to help women in that situation, than in hair-splitting on the nature of dissent.

I believe with all my heart that there are certain dynamics in our culture that might yet help the pro-life movement achieve our goals. As Mr. Ryan?s debate answer indicated, millions of children today will grow up seeing their own ultrasound. They will know that a ?fetus? is a person, and not just any person, but them. The

incidence of sex selection abortion must, at some point, invite women to think about the soundness of their belief in abortion-on-demand for any reason. The resilience of pro-life Democrats, small though we may be, gives me hope, not least when I look to the new Latino populations entering the electorate, most of them Catholic who may have been forced into the arms of the Democratic Party by a GOP that is hostile to them but, once there, can hopefully remake the Democratic Party as one more attuned to pro-life concerns. And, while we must be active and tireless in making our case, prudential in our judgments and, yes, calculating in our political assessments, never discount the power of prayer nor the effectiveness of Christian witness. St. Francis changed the world when he kissed a leper. In the mean time, I hope that pro-life groups will searchingly examine their political methods and affiliations. They may conclude that Mr. Romney is their guy and focus on saying ?nice things? about him. But, we in the pro-life movement must never let our political involvement obscure the transcendence of the human lives we seek to defend.

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