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Bp Jenky Goes Off the Reservation

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Bishop Daniel Jenky's letter to his clergy, asking them to read a letter to the people of the diocese of Peoria, is remarkable in several ways. First, Bishop Jenky is inviting his clergy to commit an intrinsic evil because in the very first paragraph, there is a big, fat lie. Jenky writes:

Neither the president of the United States nor the current majority of the Federal Senate have been willing to even consider the Catholic community's grave objections to those HHS mandates that would require all Catholic institutions, exempting only our church buildings, to fund abortion, sterilization, and artificial contraception. This assault upon our religious freedom is simply without precedent in the American political and legal system.

Of course, both the president and the Senate did "consider" the Catholic community's objections. They disagreed. I think they were wrong to disagree, but they did "consider" it and the Senate voted on it, and the White House engaged in negotiations until about mid-summer. Second, it was the GOP-led House that actually declined to consider our objections, pulling the Fortenberry Amendment from the floor. Third, I do not think anyone can actually consider the HHS mandate, which I have opposed vigorously, "without precedent." Persecution of Catholics in the nineteenth century, often with official connivance if not explicit support, strikes me as a precedent. Certainly, the decision by the voters in Oregon in the 1920s to effectively close the Catholic schools is a precedent. The decision in *Employment Division v. Smith*, although it was decided on jurisdictional grounds, preferring legislative to judicial exemptions, was deemed a sufficient enough threat to religious liberty to prompt the adoption of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Oh, and there is the fact that in several dioceses, where bishops coddled and covered for pedophiles, bankruptcy courts are now essentially in charge of the finances, which is a rather grave threat to religious liberty, albeit a self-inflicted one.

But, what is truly stunning is that before the text of the letter to be read this week, Bishop Jenky writes, ?**By virtue of your vow of obedience to me as your Bishop, I require that this letter be personally read by each celebrating priest at each Weekend Mass, November 3/4.**? (Bold in original.) I have never heard of a bishop invoking a priest?s vow of obedience in such a manner. Most bishops I know usually send a cover letter that ?invites? or ?requests? the priests to read a letter, or provides them with information and permits the priest to use such information as they see fit. An official at the Archdiocese of Boston said that he could never recall that city?s Archbishop invoking the vow of obedience in such a way. In the Archdiocese of Washington, to my knowledge and this is the kind of thing I would know, such has never been done either. In fact, I called around this morning, and no priest or canonist I spoke with could remember a bishop invoking a priest?s vow of obedience to get a letter read, especially a letter that contains such blatant tendentiousness.

Bishop Jenky?s letter, like some of the statements from a handful of other Fox News bishops, contrasts with the remarkably restrained and thoughtful commentaries coming from the leaders of the American episcopate. Cardinal Dolan, Cardinal O?Malley, Cardinal Wuerl, Archbishop Gomez and Archbishop Chaput, none of them have engaged in this kind of blatant electioneering. Perhaps they recognize what Jenky et al. have missed, something I recognized in doing my research on the Moral Majority and Jerry Falwell. After ten years in operation, the Moral Majority produced a quite unintended phenomenon: In the early 1990s, the number of people who said they had no religious affiliation began to rise appreciably according to the Pew surveys. If the fact of Christianity is a brazen political face, we quite rightly lose the attention and interest of our own people. I do not know if Cardinal Doilan needs to step in, or the Nuncio, or who, but someone needs to rein in these Fox News bishops before they bring yet more discredit to the Church they undoubtedly love.

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