

Letter From B'more: Monday Review

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 13, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Attending the annual USCCB plenary sessions in Baltimore always entails entering a parallel universe. The ballroom where the sessions are held is filled and the participants are almost exclusively male, a few women reporters and staffers sitting on the sidelines. Only in sports events is segregation by gender so obvious. All the bishops are, of course, dressed alike. All speak in measured tones. Even when criticizing a fellow bishop, the criticism is preceded by kind words.

This year, however, the bishops seem at bay. The election results seem to have struck some of them with all the force of Sandy hitting the Jersey shore. Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone said the bishops need to re-double their efforts to defend traditional marriage, but said not a word about the divorce rate among heterosexuals. Archbishop William Lori did not seem to indicate a more conciliatory approach to the White House ? he might have noted that the American people have spoken and the bishops, like the rest of us, must respect that decision - although Lori was less strident than in his pre-election comments. His comment about developing a curriculum on religious liberty strikes me with fear given his own repeatedly unsophisticated, and downright mistaken, accounts of the American founding. Lori?s homilies at his installation in Baltimore and at the beginning of the Fortnight for Freedom were outrageous, evidencing a high school level understanding of the complexities of the founding. Besides, as I noted the other day, bishops are supposed to preach Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, not James Madison, and him justified.

In his presidential address, Cardinal Timothy Dolan took a decidedly ?ad intra? approach, calling for a renewed emphasis on spiritual renewal and the need for confession and conversion. The Cardinal noted that his comments would be criticized for focusing on something that seems so basic. I will not so criticize. A heart conscious of its own need for forgiveness is, I believe, a heart less likely to engage in the kind of stridency that was seen in some pulpits this election season. A person fresh from the confessional does not attack others viciously ? and comparing the president to Hitler and Stalin is vicious ? and if they do, questions need to be raised about the mental stability to say nothing of their spiritual well-being.

Listening to Cardinal Dolan, I kept wondering what Bishop Robert Finn was thinking. I am sure he regrets what he did in the case of Father Shawn Ratigan. I am also sure he is not yet willing to take responsibility for those actions and inactions. Finn joins the long line of public officials who make a mistake, the mistake comes to light, and the public official goes to a microphone and asserts they are taking full responsibility for the mistake. But, then, nothing, as if saying the words is enough. I first noticed this habit of verbally taking responsibility but without further consequence after the attack on the compound at Waco when Attorney General Janet Reno ?took full responsibility? but did not resign. Gen. David Petraeus did the right thing by resigning, as did former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, but these men were the exception.

I spoke to several bishops, wanting to know if they would discuss Bishop Finn?s situation in executive session, and all agreed the issue was highly unlikely to be brought up. The conference is not designed to address the individual failings of particular bishops, they said. But, that misses the point. For ten years the USCCB has said that they learned their lesson about clergy sex abuse, that they have implemented rigorous standards of

oversight, they have insisted that there is no place in the world that is safer for children than the Catholic Church. Except, of course, for the little girls in Father Ratigan's pornographic photos for whom the Catholic Church was not very safe. After years of talking about accountability, Finn is not taking accountability. And, if the USCCB is not constituted to exercise the kind of fraternal correction required, who will? One has the feeling that the Vatican is waiting for the US bishops, and the bishops are waiting to the Vatican, but someone needs to step up to the plate or ? and let me be very clear here ? if Bishop Finn remains in office, no bishop in America can ever again say with a straight face that they have gotten the message, that they have learned their lesson, that the protections of the Dallas Charter are secure. All of it will be exposed as bunk. The moral authority of the entire episcopacy is on trial right now.

The moral authority of the bishops will also be at issue today when they examine the proposed document on poverty. The draft is arguably one of the worst texts to ever be proposed to the body of bishops. It was drafted by a committee led by Archbishop Allen Vigneron but the archbishop could scarcely defend the text when it was discussed yesterday at the plenary. The Catholic Church has more than 120 years of explicit papal social teaching on issues of poverty and the economy, so there is really no excuse for a draft like this. My colleague Jerry Filteau has a great analysis of the criticisms offered of the text by retired Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza which you can read by clicking [here](#). [1] Many amendments were proposed to the text and we will see how the debate plays out. Better to vote down an inadequate text than to approve this dreadful one. It is shocking that a group of bishops, called to follow Him who insisted on special care and love for the poor, could even propose this draft text. Vigneron and his committee need to take Dolan's advice and go to confession.

It is fun to attend the USCCB meeting, to see old friends, to meet new ones, to share a drink and a laugh. It is always good for a blogger who works from home to chat with colleagues in the press face-to-face rather than by email. And, of course, the smokers' caucus was as animated and enjoyable as ever. I will be following the debate today and posting as the results become clear.

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