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Crisis Mag's Parallel Universe

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

This article at Crisis magazine by Anthony Esolen is stunning in every regard, except insight.

First, after a series of outrageous metaphors, he claims that he is tired of those Catholics who preach on and on about social justice but never show any concern for the poor. Now, in the real universe, it is the conservative Catholic voices that have spent much of the last two decades, or more, telling Catholics that abortion is the only issue that matters, that abortion, same-sex marriage, et al., are non-negotiables, that abortion and other intrinsic evils (unclear on which because there are hundreds of intrinsic evils) are the only things a Catholic voter should focus on, etc. Esolen's charge was made against Sr. Simone Campbell and NETWORK, that they only cared about the poor and not the unborn, but I think Sr. Simone's response was on-point. She has expertise in anti-poverty programs and there are plenty of people with expertise in anti-abortion policy, and, just as importantly, there are pro-life implications to fighting poverty that warrant attention.

Second, Esolen then goes on to make some rather sweeping and historically ill-informed claims about Pope Leo XIII. Esolen writes of Leo, "He would have been appalled by the credit. He intended nothing other than to apply to current concerns what Jesus taught his apostles and what they handed down to their successors. His thoughts prescind not from the nature of the spanking new modern state, nor from social advances sometimes more apparent than real, but from the changeless nature of man, discoverable both by reason and by humble attention to the revealed word of God." Well, it is undoubtedly the case that the social teaching of Leo flowed from the Church's long tradition of reflection on the Gospels. It is also true that our tradition is, in certain, meaningful and important ways, changeless. But, it is also true that Leo was deeply influenced by the conditions of his time, including the need for the state to check the unbridled power of economic interests. Leo was influenced by Jesus, yes, but also by Bishop von Ketteler in Germany and Cardinal Gibbons in the US, and their defenses of the rights of workingmen and women.

Leo understood what Mr. Esolen evidently can't, that we are called to help the poor as Catholics and that while no methods are exhaustive, none of them can be ignored if they hold even the slightest promise of alleviating human suffering.

I have never encountered Mr. Esolen's writings before. I hope he does his homework next time. And, what to say about poor Crisis magazine. There is a crisis there, to be sure, but it is not the one they focus on, it is the intellectual crisis they exhibit by publishing rants like Esolen's dressed up as an argument.

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