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+Dolan Takes A Second Step Back

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Cardinal Timothy Dolan posted an item at his own blog, in which he sought to correct the impression left by several news outlets that the USCCB had "rejected" the latest proposals from the administration regarding the HHS mandate. Of course, the statement from the USCCB, for those untutored in the ways of the hierarchy, certainly lent itself to the conclusion the news media draw, that this was a flat-out rejection and, indeed, even savvy long-time reporters thought it strange that the USCCB was still holding out for an exemption for private, for-profit employers. I am guessing the bishops do not want to harm those for-profit lawsuits against the mandate, but the bishops need to stop this and recognize that not every fight is their fight, and that advocacy on extraneous concerns do not help them secure what they seek for Catholic institutions. It just makes them look intransigent.

As I wrote yesterday, it is important for the leaders of the conference to consult with their stakeholders, the ministries that will be accommodated, and find out what they think. Tomorrow begins the annual Social Ministry Gathering sponsored by the USCCB, and the people who will come to DC for that meeting are understandably beleaguered by the breezy way some bishops talk about closing down ministries, which are these people's life work, as if that life work, which is the work of the Church, the work mandated by Jesus, were nothing more than a pawn in the USCCB's legal chess game. The USCCB, as I have been urging all week, must realize also that there is a political reality here, a reality that has changed since the election. They must put themselves in the Obama administration's shoes and ask themselves "why should the administration continue negotiating with people who move the goal post or appear intransigent?" And, most importantly, the bishops must ask themselves what their role is as pastors of the Church, not as instruments of a legal strategy devised in concert with GOP operatives, or actors in a grand historical narrative about the decline of Western civilization. No, the bishops must simply be guided by the Church's own best traditions of prudence and casuistry now. The question is no longer: How can we make this point? The question is: How do we keep our ministries going?

I commend Cardinal Dolan for taking a second step back off the limb. As the author of "J'Accuse" I can scarcely say there was no cause to go out on the limb, and I do not retract a word I wrote in that original article. But, the administration retracted the pernicious four-part definition of what constitutes a religious institution and, as we have all been requesting for months, turned to a well-established section of the federal code. The USCCB is further out on the limb than I would have gone, and there are some bishops who seem to have jumped the limb altogether, but it seems to me that Cardinal Dolan is trying to find a way off it. It is not an easy task. I hope those bishops who agree it is time to declare victory and go home will support Dolan as loudly as those critics of the administration have urged him to keep going.

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