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Contra My Colleagues

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Feeling feisty this morning, so I am going to take on two of my colleagues, Tom Roberts and John Allen. Let me start by saying that both men are friends as well as colleagues, indeed, Tom Roberts has become my indispensable friend in the past few years, the person with whom I chat on the phone nearly every day and with whom I consult on virtually every issue more important than planning dinner. And, it goes without saying that both men have been at this longer than me, have better sources, and know more than I do about the workings of Holy Mother Church. That said, in two articles posted yesterday, I think they miss the mark.

Tom's article responded to my earlier post about Cardinal Mahony's participation in the conclave. He thoroughly, perhaps decisively, raises the reasons Cardinal Mahony should have absented himself from the conclave. But, I am not sure he defeats my central argument, namely, that while I would understand and commend Cardinal Mahony if he had, in good conscience, absented himself, I resent the efforts of those outside the College of Cardinals to compel him to do so.

I raised the analogy between this pressure on Mahony with the stance of Cardinal Burke concerning the administration of Communion to Catholic politicians who vote for abortion rights, and I think the analogy holds. In both instances, the Catholic politician and Cardinal Mahony must answer their own conscience first. But, Mahony's misdeeds and voting for abortion rights are both public acts. The question is whether something in the public realm is so egregious that another person is justified in assuming a person's egregious acts are evidence of a bad conscience and, therefore, disqualify them from participating in something to which they are otherwise entitled. I can imagine that there are some things that would rise to such a level, but I also believe in both these instances there are sufficient complications to make such a

thorough-going assessment of someone else's conscience deeply problematic, and even dangerous.

Roberts points out that we can vote a politician out of office but have no such recourse in the Church. True enough. The lines of authority established by the U.S. Constitution are different from those established by canon law. If Pope Benedict XVI had wished to deprive Cardinal Mahony of his cardinalatial rights, he had every right to do so, just as Archbishop Jose Gomez was within his rights in relieving Mahony of all official duties within the archdiocese he once led. I do not make any apologies for the fact that the Church is not a democracy and would shudder if it were. Already, the efforts of lay groups like SNAP and Catholics United to influence Mahony's decision reek of the kind of special interest group lobbying that has so crippled democracy in Washington. Frankly, if there is to be outside pressure on the cardinals, I would rather go back to the days when it was the Hapsburgs and the Bourbons exercising such pressure than to let single issue advocacy groups do so.

I agree with Roberts that Mahony's comments often suggest he is not so much sorry about what he did as he is sorry that he got caught. As Roberts pointed out, he certainly spent a great deal of money trying to keep it out of the papers. As fellow pilgrims and, even more, as journalists charged with policing the culture, it is our place to comment on such issues to be sure. But, at the end of the day, if Mahony's conscience is untroubled, and if there is no competent authority to deny him his place in the conclave, I think that should be the end of the matter. A Church run by petition drives and press releases from SNAP is a truly scary prospect.

My colleague John Allen yesterday wrote about the New Evangelization. The key sentences of his story are these:

In a nutshell, the "New Evangelization" is about salesmanship. The idea is to move the Catholic product in the crowded lifestyle marketplace of the post-modern world.

When cardinals say the next pope has to be committed to the New Evangelization, therefore, what they mean is that he should be a pitchman, someone who can attract people to the faith.

Just as in other markets, there are different ways of doing that ? some salespeople are brash and in-your-face, some much kinder and gentler. Some work the street, others work the high-end markets. The key, however, is to be always be closing.

Now, I am sure that this is how some people, including many bishops, understand the New Evangelization. (And, it shows how far we have to go that it is still so misunderstood at the highest reaches of the Church!) But, I would submit that the New Evangelization is not about devising a better sales pitch. Indeed, there is something really distasteful about comparing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a market commodity.

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At the start of the year, I wrote about the New Evangelization and my post started an email exchange with one of our nation's truly outstanding young theologians, Chris Ruddy at Catholic University. With his permission, I re-print a part of one of those emails:

As for the bishops and Benedict and the New Evangelization, I think that it comes down to (1) a certain intellectual and cultural acuity that requires regular reflection and visits to museums, music halls, movie theaters, etc.; and (2) an ability to grasp that Christianity involves a personal encounter with the person and the event of JC; it's not primarily a set of beliefs or a code of conduct or even a generous do-goodism. The New Evangelization is less about more efficient structural and personnel management or

better packaging or even "trying harder" than it is about letting oneself encounter the living, risen God. But, many Catholics--not least intellectuals and hierarchs--associate that personal encounter with fundamentalists and evangelicals and even Ned Flanders. I have a priest friend who says that he's seen a number of older pulpits, into which are carved--for the preacher's sight alone--some Greeks' words to the apostle Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." That's what it's all about. When Jesus is at the center, then everything else follows. But, often with the best of intentions, we want our religion to be immediately useful and productive. And, yet, God's way--as Benedict says at the end of his chapter on the Resurrection in "Jesus of Nazareth"--is that of patience and the mustard seed.

?Sir, we wish to see Jesus.? We still wish that, do we not? It is still the cry of all the spiritually hungry, the lonely, the forgotten, the mourning, the broken-hearted.

The U.S. bishops understood this ? and perhaps need a refresher course, when they wrote: ?The Gospel is not a system of concepts to be taught by a teacher to a pupil and adapted to different circumstances. The Gospel is the proclamation of the Person of Jesus Christ, of his mission, teachings and promises. Jesus Christ is not an idea, but a concrete, specific, historical individual: the Son of God who became the son of Mary. This individual, and he alone, is the Savior. There is no liberation of any kind without him.? They wrote those words in their still overlooked document (despite my frequent efforts to call attention to it) ?The Hispanic Presence in the New Evangelization in the United States? published in 1996. Dust off a copy and read it again. It is a marvelous text.

Pope Benedict's trilogy on Jesus of Nazareth is a perfect example of what the New Evangelization entails. Almost any page has something that gets to the essence of evangelization. For example, consider these words on the agony in the garden from Volume II: ?Jesus? fear is far more radical than the fear that everyone experiences in the face of death: it is the collision between light and darkness, between life and death itself ? the critical moment of decision in human history. With this understanding, following Pascal, we may see ourselves drawn quite personally into the episode on the Mount of Olives: my own sin was present in that terrifying chalice. ?Those drops of blood I shed for you,? Pascal hears the Lord say to him during the agony on the Mount of Olives (cf. *Pensees* VII, 553).? Come Palm Sunday and Good Friday, when we read the account of the Passion of the Master, I shall never hear the words treating the agony in the garden without thinking of this passage from Benedict. With him, and with Pascal, and with the Master, I will weep tears I have not wept the same way before.

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin captured something of what distinguishes the New Evangelization when he said that Ireland was ?the most catechized and least evangelized country in Europe.? The New Evangelization, then, is not about better catechesis, although we desperately need that to be sure. It is about awakening in people the itch, perhaps a nagging doubt, that there is more to life than what they can see with their eyes, more to happiness than what can be purchased at the mall, more to salvation than social justice or sexual purity. I believe a fundamental misconception is that it is directed first and foremost at disaffected Catholics or, as Allen calls them, ?distant Catholics.? No. The New Evangelization must start with those who are still in the Church, indeed with those who lead the Church, who too often reduce our faith to a set of approved sexual behaviors, appropriate ways of voting, or a general do-gooderism, those who reduce religion to ethics conveniently and in a uniquely modern way, making religion about us and not about God. It starts with them and, as Allen article indicates, many of them still don't get it and think the New Evangelization is about finding ways to use Twitter to spread the Gospel.

The articles of the Creed are not in doubt, but they are not in focus either. When we say each Sunday ?I believe in one God? do we recognize the consequences for our cultural idolatry of that claim. When we say ?I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church? do we recognize that if we believe that, there

are consequences for us, consequences in our daily lives, consequences about what counts as authoritative, consequences that can be hard and painful because, after all, the promises to the Church were made by the Crucified. And when we confess that Jesus Christ is the Savior, that the Crucified lives, but then seek to run away from our own crosses, do we evangelize or scandalize?

I am sure that Allen's reporting is accurate. I have been frustrated to hear many prominent clerics speak of the New Evangelization as a kind of marketing device. If it is only that, then to hell with it. The New Evangelization must be about finding a way to remind a forgetful, busy, distracted, consumer-laden, affluent, promiscuous culture that the most important event in our lives happened on a hillside in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. Twitter can help us be less forgetful. But, the Gospel does not come in 140 characters or less either. We must evangelize with our deeds as well as our words, and I am hoping the next pope understands that and lives it.

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