

The Verdict

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 15, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The trial that has consumed the country, or at least 90% of its airwaves, is finally over. I understand why television news loves these kinds of trials: Ours is an adversarial legal system, so the drama is built-in. Call on two former prosecutors and a couple of defense attorneys for analysis ? such as that is! ? and you have an hour of television. I am sure it costs less than these ?reality? competitions that must spend a fair amount of money creating the kind of drama a courtroom provides for free.

The verdict was unsatisfactory, especially for the family of Trayvon Martin. This is clearly a family of deep faith but even a deep faith is challenged by the thought that a young son died without justice, that their son died in vain. (Then, and only then, does a faithful soul go to the deepest levels of faith, recognizing that the question ? do we all die in vain? ? is the heart of the religious matter.) I hope that God will bring them the consolations our court system could not.

The verdict was not a surprise. The prosecution was simply, daily, out-lawyered. I did not follow the trial closely, but when I saw the prosecuting attorney, like the defense attorney before him, sitting astride a mannequin in the person of defendant George Zimmerman ? without once reversing the position so the jury might see a dramatization of the possibility that it was Zimmerman who was on top ? you knew the prosecution was not at the top of their game. When a prosecutor finishes his closing argument by asking the jury to look into their hearts, instead of looking at the evidence, you know the prosecution has failed to meet its burden of proof.

As the talking heads discussed the verdict, I could not help thinking of Mr. Snowden, ensconced in the Moscow airport, pleading for ?asylum.? Many of my friends on the left have been in a lather defending him, fretting about civil liberties, buying into his narrative that what he would face in the U.S. is persecution, not prosecution. The great State of Florida, with all of its resources, could not prove intent in the Zimmerman trial, and without that, it was impossible to combat the claim of self-defense. The state could not convince a jury. And unless you convince a jury, you don?t get to put someone in jail. Whatever else the Zimmerman trial proved, it is that civil liberties are alive and well, at least for those who can afford a good lawyer. This thought, too, haunted me: If Zimmerman had not been able to hire top-notch defense attorneys, what would his fate have been?

I confess that I wish the jury had seen its way through to a verdict of guilty on the manslaughter charge, but I was not in the courtroom, I did not evaluate all the evidence, and it is better to acquit if there is any uncertainty. Still, one cannot help thinking that the message sent by this trial is that it is possible to get away with the taking of a human life, especially if the life being taken is that of a young black man. Let?s be frank: Trying to ignore the race factor in this case is a fool?s errand. Of course, we want the socio-cultural reality to stop at the jury room door, but the rest of us can?t let ourselves off the hook so easily. In addition to feeling very sad on behalf of Martin?s parents, I found myself think sad thoughts for all the conversations all the black parents had to have with their children Sunday morning.

More important, and more urgent, than the race factor, at least to my eyes, is the gun factor. Perhaps, in their

scuffle, Mr. Zimmerman might have killed Trayvon with his bare hands, but I doubt it. Zimmerman had a gun. The gun lobby tells us that gun ownership makes one feel safer. I suppose it was some such thought the led Zimmerman to get a gun in the first place. But, I wonder if he feels safer today than he did before he bought that gun? We know it was not safer for Martin, but was it really safer for Zimmerman? His life has been turned upside down. He may have been acquitted by a jury, but his life will not return to normal, he must still wake up and go to sleep in the knowledge that he took another's life. And, given the way it all played out, he must always wonder if someone seeking revenge is lurking around the corner. I am sure Zimmerman is pleased by the jury's verdict, but the jury can't give him his life back anymore than it could give Trayvon his life back. If our streets are not safe for young black men, one of the reasons is racism, to be sure, but the bigger reason is the proliferation of guns in our gun-toting, violence-celebrating culture.

While the Zimmerman case was going on, the media embarrassed themselves hourly. There was a funny cartoon my Dad sent me that showed protesters in Tahrir Square demanding an end to the Zimmerman trial. Yes, a revolution in the largest Arab country got pushed to the fiftieth minute of hour-long news programs. The Farm Bill debacle made it into the news briefs. The Holy Father's trip to Lampedusa got nary a mention, let alone any analysis of what his words suggest about our immigration debate here in the U.S. It was Zimmerman trial all the time, round the clock.

I doubt the Justice Department will get into this mess. Would the feds be able to prove intent any more easily than the state of Florida? A civil trial may bring the Martin family a verdict that is consoling, but the ordeal will be horrendous and I doubt there will be much compensation. No, the families, both families, must continue their lives walking in the shadow of the Cross. We all walk in that shadow, it turns out, but it is easy to forget that in our busy, faux-fascinating culture. The Zimmerman trial conquered the ratings. It did not conquer original sin.

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