

"Right Turn on Immigration" Huh?

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 15, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Last week, I offered a [brief review of Archbishop Jose Gomez's book](#) [1] on immigration reform. I specifically commended the Archbishop for not engaging in the kind of histrionic political debate that has too often characterized some bishops' discussion of the HHS mandate. Instead, Gomez did not dismiss or demean those who oppose immigration reform, he acknowledged their good faith, took up their arguments, and one-by-one showed why those arguments did not actually justify opposition to comprehensive immigration reform, especially when set against some very clear Biblical mandates about welcoming the stranger and equally clear teachings from the highest Church teaching authorities. In short, instead of pretending to be a cable news talking head, Gomez tried to persuade, and he used language and a style of argumentation that befits a pastor, not a politician. This was one of the book's strengths.

[Tim Rutten, writing in the L.A. Daily News](#) [2], read the same book as I did, considered this same approach, and found it evidence of a "Catholic turn to the right" on immigration reform. Huh? Rutten cites those sections of the book in which Gomez expresses a certain sympathy for the concerns voiced by opponents of immigration reform, concerns such as border security or changing demographics. But, Rutten neglects those sections of the book in which Gomez dismantles those concerns, or explains why they lack moral weight, or provides evidence of their insufficiency to attain the goals they seek, or conflict with other, more dominant strains in the Catholic moral tradition.

It is especially ironic, and especially egregious, when Rutten contrasts Gomez's book with Pope Francis's recent homily on the Italian island of Lampedusa, where many migrants from Africa seek to enter Europe. Rutten applauds the Pope's sermon, and I do too. But, then he writes:

That's the sort of plain-spoken humane witness that already has made Francis the only international figure of moral authority delivering a cogent criticism of unrestrained consumer capitalism, the heedless globalization of the world's economy and the developed world's hardening indifference to the Southern Hemisphere's poverty and underdevelopment.

Evidently, Rutten skipped over the passages in Gomez's book in which he calls for increased economic assistance to Latin America so that we can ameliorate the causes of immigration and not merely address the symptoms. And, I am at a loss to find a single passage in Gomez's book that does not meet the definition of "plain-spoken," although I will grant that Papa Francesco has a unique gift in this regard. And, as I mentioned in my review, the central theme of Gomez's book was a call to "humane witness" to remember the humanity, not the citizenship status, of immigrants first and foremost.

Rutten is not a full-time Church-watcher. So, he may not understand that so far from representing a "right turn," Gomez's effort to support immigration reform has been undertaken in the face of opposition from some

conservative Catholics. It was Gomez who went to the Napa Institute, a conservative group that Rutten takes a swipe at, using a kind of 'guilt-by-association' technique that should make all liberals skin crawl, but does he not grasp that Gomez went there to convince those conservative Catholics to support the bishops in supporting immigration reform? Is Rutten aware that Gomez undertook a similar mission to the Knights of Columbus, a group that is closely aligned with the Republican Party, and Gomez called upon them to be Catholics first on the issue? Is Rutten aware that Gomez has continually sought to bring his brother bishops along, urging them to pay as much attention to the immigration issue as they have to other issues that have a more conservative trajectory?

Rutten indulges other innuendos. He notes that Gomez is a priest from Opus Dei, the conservative Catholic group that was, as Rutten notes, founded in fascist Spain. I have my difficulties with Opus Dei, to be sure, but it is simply wrong to paint them all with a Falangist brush. He might have noted, by way of contrast, that early in his priestly career, Gomez was elected to preside over the Hispanic Priests Federation, a group with a decidedly left-of-center approach to issues both political and ecclesiastical. Rutten links the title of Gomez's book with the title of a book by Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput, a prelate who really does evidence a culture warrior approach to issues quite different from that followed by Gomez. I do not know how or why Gomez chose this title. And, of course, we all know that Gomez was an auxiliary bishop to Chaput when they were both in Denver, but it takes about five minutes of watching both men to recognize they exhibit decidedly different styles of leadership in the Church.

I am not sure what Rutten's objective is in writing this tendentious article? Does he simply want to sideline the Church from the immigration debate? If so, he should learn a little bit about Washington and understand that the Catholic bishops do have some political street cred with certain conservative Republican members of Congress whose votes will be needed if we are to pass immigration reform, street cred that I suspect Rutten and his liberal friends lack. Does he know that the U.S. bishops have fought to lower the time required to apply for citizenship and to lessen the penalties? Does he know that the Catholic bishops have argued that immigration should not be reserved for engineers with advanced degrees but for common folk who merely wish to be reunited with their families? Is he aware that the Catholic Church is increasingly vocal on a host of concerns to liberals, from gun violence to climate change to fighting poverty?

My fear is that Rutten ? and I do not know the man ? is simply one of those pundits whose bearings come only from one side of the nation's ideological and political divides. If someone is on the other side on any issue, they become the enemy. All the premises accepted by one's own side are true and require no examination, but engaging in discussion with the heretics on the other side is defeatist or worse. Rutten writes like a fundamentalist, more Jerry Falwell than journalist, blinded by an ideological narrative that no longer sees the need to ask who, what, when, where, and why, the kinds of questions journalists ask. Maybe he wants a show on MSNBC. Maybe he aspires to be editor of the Nation. Who knows? What I do know is that his attack on Gomez is an unworthy one and, in the event, horribly counter-productive for those of us who want to see immigration reform passed.

Source URL (retrieved on 05/24/2017 - 18:12): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/right-turn-immigration-huh>

Links:

[1] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/gomezs-immigration-and-next-america>

[2] http://www.dailynews.com/opinions/ci_23655205/catholic-right-turn-immigrations-moral-high-road-tim