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25 Years A Bishop

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 3, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Today is the 25th anniversary of the episcopal ordination of Archbishop Roberto Gonzalez, the Archbishop of San Juan, Puerto Rico.

It is a very happy occasion, first and foremost for the people of Puerto Rico. +Roberto has been a champion of the people of this island, of their culture and language, of their nationhood. The Church is inextricably intertwined with the cultural roots of this island, and so those who oppose the Church, understandably seek to create a new, and different culture, one in which the role of the Church is diminished. But, asking Puerto Ricans not to love the Virgin Mary, not to celebrate Holy Week with intense processions and pilgrimages, and not to feel a sense of solidarity with the saints, is to ask a Puerto Rican to lose his identity. It is like asking a Jew to stop being Jewish. Puerto Rico is free and Israel is free, so everyone has a legal right to turn their back on their inheritance. But, the law cannot protect a person who loses his identity.

For +Roberto, his leadership of the people of this island began on the day of his installation as Archbishop in 1999. A week before his installation, a young civilian guard, David Sanes Rodriguez, was killed by stray bombs at the U.S. Navy installation in Vieques, a small island off the Puerto Rican coast. The incident touched a nerve with the Puerto Rican people, who had often been treated shabbily by the U.S. and its military. Archbishop Gonzalez called for the Navy to leave on the day he was installed. A few weeks later, he led the largest, peaceful protest in the island?s history, as thousands walked arm-in-arm down a four-lane highway, marching for peace for Vieques. There are not many bishops who take on the U.S. military. There are not many Latin Americans who take on the U.S. Military. +Roberto took them on and, astonishingly, won. The Navy withdrew from Vieques.

Some critics have complained that the archbishop is too involved in politics. This is hogwash. +Roberto?s political involvement has been entirely derivative, a consequence of his efforts to champion the Catholic roots of the culture. In Puerto Rico, there are Democrats and Republicans, but the dominant political fault line is between those who advocate statehood and those who wish to keep some distance from the socio-political power of the States. Obviously, the Church has long sided with those wishing to keep some distance. ?I have nothing against Hawaii,? one cleric told me years ago, ?but we don?t want to become Hawaii.? As well, the US influence here, brought first by the Marines when they landed at Guanica during the Spanish-American War, has long had an anti-Catholic bent. Those were the years of manifest destiny, and the early federal authorities encouraged a program of ?Christianization? on the island, even though the Gospel has been preached here since the fifteenth century.

Those who have been following the news from the Dominican Republic, where the nuncio was yanked amidst charges he had hired young boys for sex, will know that the past months have not been easy for the Church in Puerto Rico. (The nuncio to the Dominican Republic is always the Apostolic Delegate for Puerto Rico as well.)

It was revealed in April that Archbishop Roberto?s resignation had been requested by the Congregation for Bishops because of charges the nuncio leveled. After lots of prayers, the authorities in the Holy See realized that the nuncio was a sociopath and his campaign against +Roberto a vendetta based on false charges. As the Council of Cardinals meets in Rome today, they are well advised to suggest establishing a process ? perhaps even due process ? to examine such charges. We in the States wonder why Bishop Finn is still the Bishop in Kansas City. Here in San Juan, they spent many months worried they would lose their beloved archbishop. Both cases would benefit from a process that is fair and the people of God deserve a process that is reasonably prompt.

When you walk down the streets of Old San Juan with +Roberto, the shopkeepers all come out to greet him. The parking attendants at the lot next to the cathedral embrace him. In the restaurants near the Arzobispado, all the cooks and dishwashers are on a first-name basis with their archbishop: At the end of the meal, before leaving, +Roberto always makes his way to the kitchen to greet the workers and thank them for their work. Yesterday, the policeman outside the hotel greeted the archbishop like an old friend who he arrived. +Roberto has, as Papa Francesco likes to say, the ?smell of the sheep.?

In addition to being a good shepherd to his flock, +Roberto has been a great friend and a great priest to me and my family. We met in 1990 when Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete brought him to lunch at Kramerbooks in Washington. They were sitting at Table 43 ? I can remember it as if it were yesterday. I refused to believe he was a bishop, he was so young. +Roberto was only 38 years old when he became a bishop in 1988. Whenever he came to Washington, we would break bread together and talk about the Church, about Puerto Rico, about life. Since his arrival in San Juan, I adopted the habit of coming to the island for my birthday and each year, +Roberto celebrates Mass for me, my family and other friends who have accompanied us over the years. Seven years ago, when my mother died, +Roberto came to Connecticut to celebrate her funeral Mass. My parents spent the first years of their married life here in Puerto Rico in the early 1950s. To have the archbishop of this island she loved so much preside at her funeral meant the world to my Dad. It meant the world to me.

Today there will be a prayer service for the clergy at noon and a Mass tonight to mark this happy occasion. I am so honored to be a part of these celebrations. And more than honored. It is a joy to celebrate this wonderful man?s 25 years as a bishop, to thank God for the many graces that have flowed through his ministry to the Church, and to pray that the good Lord will give +Roberto many more years. Ad Multos Annos.

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