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+McElroy's Game Changer

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Bishop Robert McElroy, the auxiliary bishop of San Francisco, has published a very important article at *America* magazine. titled, "**Pope Francis makes addressing poverty essential.**" I urge all of my readers to consult it.

Like Pope Francis, +McElroy celebrates the social doctrine of the Church, especially the moral imperative to care for the poor, at a time when some Catholics have sought to minimize or explain away the Church's social teachings. He rightly notes that the pope is calling us each to personal conversion in our lifestyles, and hits on what is, to me, one of the reasons for this pope's attractiveness, his effort to ? to make us all deeply uncomfortable, so that in our discomfort we may recognize and confront the alienation from our own humanity that occurs when we seek happiness in objects rather than in relationship with God and others.?

+McElroy has clearly been reading the pope's words with an open heart. He also may be one of the smartest bishops in the United States, and so he neatly links different comments the pope has made and brings them into a singular cultural focus:

Francis' message also has been an invitation to cultural conversion, laying bare the three false cultures that materialism has created in our world: the culture of comfort that makes us think only of ourselves; the culture of waste that seizes the gifts of the created order only to savor them for a moment and then discard them; and the culture of indifference that desensitizes us to the suffering of others, no matter how intense, no matter how sustained. Pope Francis' words about the ?globalization of indifference? echo the poignant observation of Pope Benedict in his encyclical ?Charity in Truth? (2009): ?As society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbors but does not make us brothers.?

Bishop McElroy also goes on to demonstrate that the category of intrinsic evil, drawn from moral

theology, is not a particularly useful category for determining the Church's role in the public square, still less the priority to be assigned different issues. The concept of 'intrinsic evil' has its uses, but in politics, those uses are not exhaustive. Poverty is not an intrinsic evil, but it does not lose any of its moral urgency on account of that fact. He writes:

It is crucial to fully recognize the nature of intrinsic evil and its relationship to the common good. In recent years, however, some arguments have been broadly advanced in Catholic political conversation proposing that issues pertaining to intrinsically evil acts automatically have priority in the public order over all other issues of grave evil, like poverty, war, unjust immigration laws and the lack of restorative justice in the criminal justice system. This has the effect of labeling these other crucial issues of Catholic social teaching 'optional' in the minds of many Catholics.

As well, +McElroy rehabilitates a proper understanding of the role of prudential judgment in all discussions of the moral significance of public policy positions. Prudence must accompany all of our judgments. It is a virtue. The fact that an issue requires prudential judgment, does not mean we can approach it in a morally relativistic way. +McElroy writes:

The role of prudence has been one of the most misused elements in the Catholic political conversation in the United States in recent years. It is frequently asserted, particularly in election years, that issues pertaining to intrinsic evils do not necessitate prudential judgment, while other grave evils like war, poverty or the unjust treatment of immigrants are merely prudentially laden issues on which people of good will can disagree.

The truth is that prudence is a necessary element of any effort to advance the common good through governmental action. Moving from even the clearest moral principle to specific legislation or administrative action involves questions of strategy, prioritization and practicality. Even then, no law or program can ever encapsulate the clarity and fullness of the original moral principle.

If this were merely an academic discussion, +McElroy's article would still be important. But because of the political use to which the notions of intrinsic evil and prudential judgment have been put, and specifically the way some conservative Catholic commentators have set the two ideas in opposition to one another, McElroy's article is a game changer.

Other prelates, most notably Cardinal Sean O'Malley, have celebrated Pope Francis' focus on the poor and his holding up the social doctrine of the Church. But, so far as I know, +McElroy is the first prelate to explicitly, and authoritatively, challenge the use, better to say misuse, of Catholic moral theology in discussions of public policy.

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Several theologians have been at this for some time. Cathleen Kaveny's wonderful book "Law's Virtues" dealt with these issues, and especially laid bare the problems with transporting the concept of intrinsic evil into the political realm. I discuss this part of her book in the second part of my three-part review, which can be found here. As well, Meghan Clark defended a correct understanding of prudential judgment during the 2012 elections, when conservative Catholics looking to give cover for Congressman Paul Ryan's draconian budget invoked the idea as a kind of "get-out-of jail free" card. And, I am happy to recall my debate with Father Robert Sirico of the Acton Institute in January when he tried to make the argument that Bishop McElroy here eviscerates. I post the video of that debate below and while the subject comes up at several point, it is at 1:04:54 that we engage on these issues specifically.

To be clear, Bishop McElroy has driven a stake through the heart of those arguments, put forward by no less a luminary than Robbie George, that the Church in the U.S. should focus on "five non-negotiable issues" when considering how to vote. As I argued at the time, in a sense, all the Church's teachings are "non-negotiable" and whenever a proposed moral platform coheres a little too neatly, and too obviously, with one political party, we should be suspicious. As well, there can be no more hiding behind prudential judgment to defend Congressman Ryan's budget plans: The fact that assessing a budget requires prudential judgment does not eliminate the need to make those prudential judgments which are informed by moral considerations all the way down from the most abstract to the most particular. There are right and wrong answers to issues that require prudential judgment.

In recent years, I have come to take notice of Bishop McElroy. I had occasion to discuss him just last week with a man who has known him for many years and he concurred that +McElroy is one of the finest bishops in the United States. With this article, he also emerges as the kind of bishop capable of first understanding Pope Francis and, second, applying the pope's vision to an American context. I don't think you will find +McElroy publishing emails from people who feel "betrayed" by the Roman Pontiff. Instead, what we have in this essay is a bishop who "gets" Francis but who also "gets" American culture and begins a dialogue between the two. +McElroy has made a significant contribution to Catholic moral and political discourse. Let's hope his brother bishops are listening.

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