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How Bishops Speak

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Saturday, when I found to my dismay that the Notre Dame football game was pre-empted in our media market, I flipped channels and came across two speeches at the Napa Institute on EWTN, the first on "Family as the Foundation of Culture," by Archbishop John Nienstedt of St. Paul, and the second entitled, "The Exalted Creator: Reflections on Human Nature and the Image of God," by Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez.

I call attention to these two talks because they almost perfectly represent the two dominant strains of episcopal leadership in the U.S. today, the first what I have dubbed a "culture warrior" approach and the second what I consider a more evangelical and pastoral approach.

+Nienstedt's talk is all gloom and doom. Mind you, the state of the family in modern American life is a source of deep concern. But, the reasons why so many families fall apart are many and complicated, the situation is not given to facile, ideologically driven explanations, yet that is what +Nienstedt delivered. It is a jeremiad, which is not the dominant method of socio-political moral analysis in our Church, and a jeremiad that is a little too neatly in sync with a neo-conservative Catholic reading of U.S. culture.

For example, +Nienstedt quotes a passage from a book, *What is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense*, co-authored by Sherif Girgis, Ryan Anderson and Robert George:

If the law defines marriage to include same-sex partners, many will come to misunderstand marriage. They will not see it as essentially comprehensive, or thus (among other things) as ordered to procreation and family life?but as essentially an emotional union . . . they will therefore tend not to understand or respect the objective norms of permanence or sexual exclusivity that shape it. Nor, in the end, will they

see why the terms of marriage should not depend altogether on the will of the parties, be they two or ten in number, as the terms of friendships and contracts do. That is, to the extent that marriage is misunderstood, it will be harder to see the point of its norms, to live by them, and to urge them on others. And this besides making any remaining restrictions on marriage arbitrary, will damage the many cultural and political goods that get the state involved in marriage in the first place.[

This "misunderstanding" surely arose long before anyone had ever heard of a same-sex marriage proposal. Divorce rates in America began to spike in the 1950s and no-fault divorce laws were mostly codified in the 1970s. Yet, Girgis, Anderson and George employ the future tense in their opening statement of concern "people *will* come to misunderstand marriage" and one suspects this is to heighten the sense of ominous threat posed by gay marriage when, in fact, the thing they fear has already happened. And it began to happen when Eisenhower was President. Go figure.

In another part of the talk, Nienstedt voices his concern about what he terms "an assault on reason." I think he would be on safer ground if he admitted that his ideological opponents have a different understanding of reason "certainly, they do not think they are assaulting reason but vindicating it. I agree that they are wrong, but it costs nothing to presume the good faith of one's ideological opponents. In any event, here is the quote:

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To illustrate this attack on reason, one need go no further than the judicial intervention in 1992's Planned Parenthood v. Casey. In their plurality opinion, Justices Kennedy, O'Connor, and Souter invoked a famous "mystery clause" to uphold the Court's 1973 decision of Roe v. Wade. One peculiar passage reads as follows:

At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."

If, by right, one may freely define the meaning of existence without hindrance, the provisioning of law carries no weight whatsoever. Indeed, this "mystery clause" appears inspired by the influential Age of Enlightenment which celebrates a highly individualistic and subjective view of "freedom," and, therefore, of "choice." It creates the impression that choice is, in and of itself, a moral act of human freedom and an ultimate expression of life and it rejects any objective criteria or moral participation in the shaping of social situations. This view, incompatible with rational thought, is surely the work of Satan, in the words of Blessed John Paul, who lusted after this so-called "liberty" above all else.

You will see the problems. The quote from *Casey* is indeed incompatible with our Christian understanding, but it is not incompatible with the thinking of the Founding Fathers, something our conservative friends are loath to admit. And you can't blame Obama for *Casey*: That was Sandra Day O'Connor, Ronald Reagan's first appointee, who penned the "mystery clause." But, most alarmingly, why does it not dawn on Nienstedt to ask what seems an obvious question: If the Enlightenment happened some 250 years ago, why is it only now that our civilization has gone to hell in a handbasket as he sees it? Hint: Markets affect behavior. But, better not say that when speaking at a Napa Institute event.

+Nienstedt goes on to cite Russell Shaw's concern, a concern I share to a certain degree, about the demise of the Catholic subculture. Shaw wrote:

For a long time, the subculture of immigrant Catholicism more or less successfully shielded Catholics (?ghettoized? them, some would say). But starting in the late 1950s and continuing through the 1960s and 1970s, American Catholics, instead of reforming and updating their subculture, dismantled this network of distinctively Catholic institutions and programs, organizations and movements that had served them well.

Shaw goes on to commend, and +Nienstedt seconds, reconstituting that subculture. This is the Amish solution, except I think there are too many of us RCs to make it work. More importantly, if as Shaw and +Nienstedt correctly suggest, the loss of the subculture has resulted in a loss of Catholic identity, the question for the present and future: How do we reconstitute our Catholic identity in the polymorphous culture in which we live, or more deeply, how do we generate an authentic Catholic culture? Here, it seems to me, neither Shaw nor Nienstedt has any vision. There is no going back. The popular saying notwithstanding, history is the one thing that never repeats itself. But, I would point to a more immediate difficulty: Who would follow the gloomy, self-referential vision of evangelical witness that +Nienstedt's talk epitomizes? Where is the sense that one gets from a Pope Francis sermon that we should not scold those who have fallen under the sway of the Enlightenment but love them, maybe even see what they have to teach us? Where is the joy and the hope that comes from the encounter with Jesus Christ? +Nienstedt's talk is a perfect example of what Pope Francis has condemned, a sour-puss, dreary, dry, antiseptic talk that would inspire precisely no one. The following day, at Mass, the Gospel of Luke told the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. As I hear the Pharisee's words ? ?O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity? ? I could not help putting +Nienstedt's face on the passage.

My dissatisfaction was quickly ameliorated, however, when the next speaker took to the rostrum. Archbishop Jose Gomez opened and closed his talk with references to Dorothy Day, and if ever there was a contemporary story of radical conversion, one that warms the heart and challenges the culture, there it is. But, instead of a jeremiad, +Gomez used Dorothy Day's story to make the thoroughly orthodox, thoroughly anti-Enlightenment, thoroughly pastoral point: ?The memory of God has already faded for many people. New generations are growing up without any religion. We are fast becoming a society of ?practical atheists.? When we forget our Creator we forget what creation means. We lose the sense of our own meaning as his creatures. That's what's happening in our society. If God is not our Father, then we are not brothers and sisters and we have no responsibility for one another.?

+Gomez is not shy about delivering his critique of contemporary culture. But, the difference is that his words are the words of a pastor, they do not cast aspersion against anyone but indict us all, and, in the manner of Dorothy Day, direct us towards a deeper conversion of ourselves and, just so, of our culture. He states:

God has entrusted us in the Church with the beautiful truth that the human person is sacred. That every man and woman is created in the image and likeness of God.

There is a beautiful saying from the Church Father, St. Ireneaus: ?The glory of God is man fully alive; moreover man's life is the vision of God.? This belief runs deep in Judaism as well as Christianity. There is a beautiful Midrash that says: ?A procession of angels pass before a human being wherever he or she goes, proclaiming, Make way for the image of God!?

The men and women of our times need to hear this good news. They need to know they are the glory of God, created and destined for the vision of God. They need to know that they are God's image and that everyone they meet is God's image, too.

?And that everyone they meet is God's image, too.? That is what has been missing from so much of the cultural criticism coming from the right, the acceptance of the divine image within the other, often obscured, but always worthy of our love and respect. I would not as well that nowhere in his talk does +Gomez sound like he is repeating the talking points of a conservative think tank. He sounds like a pastor.

Two weeks from today, the U.S. bishops will begin their annual plenary. Above all, they need to ask themselves if the conservative cultural warrior model of engaging the culture has worked, and if not, how should they engage the culture. Pope Francis has proposed a different model of cultural engagement, one that relies solely on the traditional spiritual armaments of the Church ? renunciation of wealth and status, commitment to the poor, an acute sense of our own sinfulness, and a committed love for all. He is not suggesting law suits. He is not calling for demonizing the proponents of same sex marriage. Francis is reminding the Church that history belongs to the Lord Jesus, and so perhaps we need to be a little less eager to listen to those who spout jeremiads and blame others and generally can't manage to put a smile on anyone's face. +Gomez's talk embodies the Francis approach. +Nienstedt's, not so much.

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