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Obama's Mea Culpa

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Distinctly Catholic

The President did his best mea culpa yesterday. Of course, it should have been a mea maxima culpa, but politicians have enough trouble admitting a mistake, so we should not expect too much from them by way of contrition. Still, when the thing you are apologizing for is the mishandling of your most precious political achievement, I would not have minded hearing President Obama say something like, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The key question in the on-going struggle over the fate of the Affordable Care Act is which sin is at the heart of the difficulties with the rollout. Yesterday, President Obama seemed to suggest that the problem was something akin to sloth. They were not paying enough attention, not listening to the warnings that there were problems. This is no doubt true.

The Republicans charge that the real sin at the heart of the ACA mess this month is a variety of gluttony. Big government in its endless quest for more power took on the management of one-fifth of the economy and, like someone who ate too much at the Thanksgiving Day table, is now suffering from acute indigestion. Their only solution is to roll the thing back and put government on a strict diet. Of course, for all the problems with the rollout of the ACA, it is hard not to see that the GOP position entails a different sin, one the Holy Father discussed at Lampedusa, the sin of indifference. Pope Francis was speaking about the global indifference to the suffering of immigrants, and the GOP is displaying ? and has displayed for decades! ? an indifference to the fate of the uninsured. Indifference is not listed among the seven deadly, but perhaps it is a variety of sloth, a moral sloth.

I regret to add that I would feel better about the USCCB if they had spent as much time in the past couple of years focusing on the need to get health insurance to the poor as they did trying to make sure that insurance did not cover contraception.

Malice is the sin that afflicts the Republicans as well. I understand that politics is a rough sport, but their venom against President Obama has seemed a bit out-sized and, in certain quarters, venom seems to be the gas on which the GOP combustion engine runs these days. (To be sure, there was plenty of Democratic venom directed against President Bush too, some of it earned, but some of it gratuitous.) Still, I am disturbed when a candidate for the U.S. Senate, Chris McDaniel, admittedly in the great state of Mississippi, is discovered to be active with a neo-confederate movement and this does not prevent him from earning the endorsement of the Club for Growth and various Tea Party events. I suspect that says something about the tolerance of today's GOP for malice, no?

Of course, in the realm of politics, the sin that usually afflicts politicians is the sin of pride, and there is plenty of that to go around. I have commented before that President Obama's dictum "Good policy is good politics," reflects a very Ivy League rationalism that may fit Obama's bloodless temperament, but does not work well when, as now, a policy is having difficulty. It is the kind of self-satisfied statement the proud make. If the President had reflected more on history, and less on his own role in it, he might have long ago recognized the need for an over-arching moral narrative to justify the ACA, a narrative that could resist a bumpy rollout. Politics, like war, has its unexpected difficulties and plenty of unforeseen disasters. Unless people know what they are fighting for, and why they are fighting, they are all too likely to go AWOL when the going gets tough.

Obama's pride does not excuse the Republicans' intransigence, or their acute hypocrisy. Here they are complaining about the plan not working when they did not want it to ever start! Nor does Obama's pride excuse former President Bill Clinton who, I think foolishly, jumped into the fray in an apparent effort to disassociate the family name from the current troubles. The fact that it was Bill, not Hillary, putting the knife into Obama's back sent a chill through official Democratic circles, and could yet be the biggest problem Hillary faces if she chooses to run: Will she be the President or will Bill be back for a third term? Or will he just do the dirty work? How will that work with this drama-plagued family? And, most importantly, why should the rest of us want to have the nation re-visited with all that Clinton drama?

The President has offered a one year extension on the lousy insurance policies that the ACA wished to consign to the trash can. This has angered the insurance companies, and will be yet another hurdle for the states. I suppose there was no political alternative. I am not sure why Democrats like the idea of these plans being canceled next year, in the month before the election, rather than now. But, there it is. Our dysfunctional DC pols can't see anything beyond the shortest of short-term horizons. Blindness is not a sin, but in a politician, it should be.

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