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Contra MSW

by Tom Roberts

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I don't often take public exception to the published opinions of my colleague and friend, Michael Sean Winters, in part because he hears enough from me in regular, informal conversation of my disagreements with some of his views. I also don't because I think in the main he provides a refreshing and intelligent challenge to some of what I'll call, for lack of a more precise term, NCR orthodoxies, as well as detailed and compelling arguments against an element of the Catholic community that wraps itself in the flag and preaches the good news of undeterred capitalism.

However, I would like to register my objections to some of his points in the Contra Mary Hunt column of Jan. 15, which I caught up with a few days later. The column, I think, illustrates both a consistent blind spot on Winters' part regarding women's issues in the church and the rather narrow range of options within which he would permit them to be addressed.

I also think the column exhibits a kind of protective zeal regarding the papacy of Francis that the pope himself, given the freewheeling nature of his discussion and the questions he tolerates, might find restrictive.

Further, I don't want to be placed, as Winters' construction would, in a situation of "either-or" between the poles of "the left," one of which is "thrilled" with Francis with the other engaged in a reduction of Catholicism and their assessment of the pope to "a laundry list of neuralgic, mostly sex-related, issues." This papacy is far too rich in human understanding and challenge to the status quo to set up those kinds of camps.

For starters, Winters takes issue with Hunt's observation that Francis' style "does not change the fact that the institutional Roman Catholic Church is a rigid hierarchy led by a pope" and that warm feelings about the pope merely shore up that model. "To my mind, this is a serious danger," she wrote.

Winters immediately leaps to a "shudder" thinking of "what kind of leaderless church she imagines" and that such a lurch toward democracy in the church would not guarantee panacea for the church's ills. It is an unfortunate leap and one that would, in real time, land him on his nose far short of the mark he's aiming for. (For the record, I would certainly favor a greater role of laity and priests in the selection of bishops but would not favor any sort of direct democracy. Our own civil experience, corrupted by money and interest groups, should warn us away from that extreme end of the spectrum. I am far more interested, however the choices is made, in the institution of new mechanisms for holding bishops accountable. We've had far too many whose behavior has run from utterly embarrassing to sheer incompetence to criminal who remain in place.)

I don't detect that Hunt wants a "leaderless church" and I take note that such figures as Atty . Nicholas Cafardi, a canon and civil lawyer of note and someone who has served the institution in several capacities, has written of the need for greater lay participation in choosing bishops.

I might agree with my friend that the addition of letters to the LGBTQ (apparently there's now an "I" being included at times) is reaching ridiculous lengths. But far more important than the dismissal of an unwieldy acronym is the underlying point. On the books in the church is the characterization of people who find themselves of a non-heterosexual orientation as "objectively disordered." I have always thought that a brutal and inhuman way to characterize anyone. I'm inclined to allow great latitude in the addition of initials to their own designation. The wonder to me is how people so described by a community's leaders can find the desire and will to struggle to remain within it. The church, indeed, needs to do something about perpetrating such an ugly description, not to mention its attendant and distorted notions about human sexuality.

Finally, though Winters concedes that the church "must come to grips with the role of women," it is the thinnest of endorsements of that point and again dismisses her argument with another leap from the ridiculous to the more ridiculous: "Who needs the Council of Nicea when you have the last issue of The Nation?" He's not convincing when he's at his most intemperate, and it is quite reasonable to note that the tradition which he himself admits is the result of a mostly "male-driven narrative" would be the one least likely to yield its own correction. If the sweep of teaching in the tradition holds the key to unlocking a future for women in the church it will only be discovered by the consistent pronouncement of an alternative tradition, a woman-driven narrative, strong enough to erode the layers of history that has kept the key hidden

The reality in the church today, in this 21st century version, is that women are excluded from any significant decision-making roles in the institution, particularly at the Vatican level, which is to say, at the global level.

Even in the United States, for instance, where demography alone is reshaping the church, the official answer to personnel shortages is not the overwhelming number of women who have trained to minister in the church over recent decades, but a new layer of male-only ordained men called permanent deacons.

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Popes, bishops, priests and deacons can protest all they like that ordination is about service. Lay people know it is also about power and access. I don't see that changing even in the era of Francis. He might already have done a great deal to diminish destructive clericalism, but the reality remains that the group of eight cardinals serving him as advisors for governing the universal church are all men; all those who will receive red hats in the coming months will be men; all of those who will be newly entrusted as the leaders and chief teachers in dioceses, bishops, will be men. Women simply are not permitted to fashion many lines of the narrative at the level where decisions are made and leadership is exercised.

To use my friend Michael's parting image, an alien from outer space newly arrived and unaware of the workings of grace might well wonder how an institution of the church's dimension and influence could continue to exist with such exclusionary policies.

I am among those thrilled with Francis and the enormous steps (and I count them as far more than symbolic) he has taken to relocate the papacy, to deflate the clerical culture, to restore a humanity and pastoral approach as central to leadership. He has rekindled a portion of the Catholic imagination that takes us out of the confines of the sanctuary, beyond the narrow concerns and strategies of the culture wars to a more demanding encounter with people before issues and with the poor as more than statistics.

His approach ? generous, heartfelt, infused with mercy ? sets up new expectations. They may run ahead of reality, they may raise questions that disturb the equilibrium and bliss of the moment. They remain essential, even in this time of papal kindness.

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