

To Hell With the UN

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 6, 2014 | Distinctly Catholic

From the organization that brought you the "Zionism is racism" resolution, now we have been told that the Catholic Church is in violation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. From the organization that, quite recently, enlisted the Qaddafi regime to lead the UN Committee on Human Rights, we are told that the Catholic Church is unduly concerned about human rights because it teaches that unborn children should not be killed and that traditional marriage is a thing worth championing. Whose culture war is it now?

[My friends Mark Silk and Austen Ivereigh](#) [1] are correct to point out that the brilliant academics and consultants who drafted this report evidently could not find time to understand how the Catholic Church is structured: Yes, the entire Church is bound up with the practice of obedience, but religious orders and dioceses yield a great deal of functional autonomy and, in no meaningful sense, is the Holy Father a CEO of the Church.

That said, I think Silk is mistaken in drawing the distinction he does between the Vatican City State and the Holy See. In international law, it is the Holy See that is recognized, not the Vatican City State, which is to say, the Holy See is recognized not as the landlord of a few acres on the west bank of the Tiber. Its legal personality subsists in its role as head of the universal Church. In the event, the UN Committee is not off the hook: It still misunderstands how oversight of personnel functions within the universal Church.

Much of what the UN Committee says about the sex abuse crisis is hardly news to readers of NCR. Various actors within the Church have mishandled this issue in ways that betray the Gospel and which are criminal as well. This mishandling includes the actions of no less than the sovereign pontiff as the late Pope John Paul II routinely refused to face facts in the case of Father Marcial Maciel Degollado. John Paul II also, and understandably, was concerned about the number of priests seeking to be laicized and forbid such laicizations for priests under 40. Unfortunately, that ban extended to priests accused of abusing children. Strike two. As we prepare for the canonization of John Paul II, recognizing the man's undoubted holiness, we should all resist the "John Paul the Great" mantra that has been peddled by his champions for years. In many ways, he was great. In other ways, not so much.

The most disturbing thing about the UN Committee report was the introduction of issues such as homosexuality and abortion and contraception into its findings. As has been pointed out, this committee condemnation would seem to contradict the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights' guarantees of religious liberty. I point out to my friends who think the issue of religious liberty is stupid, or overblown, or merely a political wedge issue, this report indicates it is not. There are those who are indifferent to religious liberty rights when those rights conflict with a social agenda being promoted by powerful, organized political activists such as the gay rights lobby and certain women's groups. That is a fact. The culture wars are not only fought from the right.

I would also point out that when the sex abuse crisis first emerged, some of us objected, and objected loudly, to the theory proposed by some of our conservative friends that the sex abuse crisis was not really about abusing children, but post-pubescent teens, that this was essentially a gay phenomenon. That theory was bunk then and it is bunk now. How strange, then, to see a linkage between the two coming from left?

Few commentators have been more vocal than myself about the difficulties that arise when the Church's leaders engage in culture wars. We should not descend to the tactics and patterns of thought of those who promote culture wars for two reasons. As a matter of principle, our strength is in the Lord, not in a Koch Brothers-funded media campaign. As a matter of political efficacy, if we engage the culture wars in the political realm, we will be treated as political actors, not religious actors, with all the ugly consequences that flow therefrom, not least the likelihood that we will lose.

But, this caution does not require us to be naïve. There really are enemies to the Church. Some of the patterns of thought that seek to strip the Church of its divinely ordained beliefs sometimes find expression, regrettably, within the Church. The Devil has purposes for us all. We must engage the Church's critics first and foremost with a disposition to listen, to seek common ground, to disarm them with the gifts of the Spirit. A certain narrative of cultural decline, leading to the prospect of a smaller purer Church frequently intones against secularization. I, too, am worried about secularization. But, I suspect Pope Francis has done more in ten months to beat back the forces of secularization than a hundred gloom-and-doom sermons and tomes.

I suspect my former colleague, John Allen, [overstates the degree](#) [2] to which this report will make it more difficult for those in the Church who have dealt with the sex abuse crisis with all the vigor it demands. I also suspect that this report will have little effect on the attitudes of Vatican curialists and diplomats regarding the UN. It is increasingly a ridiculous body that does a few things very well but most things very badly. The Holy See has long had a sunny view of the organization which has now dumped idiocy and bigotry upon the Church. It is time to look at the UN with clear eyes. It is also time for the universal Church to crack down on pedophiles and the bishops who protect them. And, it is also time for the Church to unapologetically defend her teachings from any quarter that challenges them, not subjecting them to a political strategy or cultural agenda, explaining them patiently and as persuasively as possible, proposing, never imposing, confident that the Lord is the Lord of history. His Word will not return to Him void, he says in the 55th Chapter of Isaiah we listen to at the Easter Vigil. Can the clowns at Geneva say as much?

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[1] <http://marksilk.religionnews.com/2014/02/05/u-n-smacks-vatican-handling-sex-abuse/>

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