

## Contra Nicholas Hahn on Immigration

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 12, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Nicholas Hahn, editor at RealClearReligion, [took to the pages of RealUnclearReligion](#) [1], I mean, the American Spectator, to launch an attack on the U.S. bishops because of their activism on behalf of comprehensive immigration reform. Like many of Mr. Hahn's forays into public debate, his latest column demonstrates, in equal parts, the willingness to misunderstand the way bishops interact with the public sphere, and, when that does not suffice, to ignore the facts entirely.

Hahn repeats the charge leveled by George Weigel that the bishops' Mass at the border in March turned the most sacred rite of the Church into "an act of political theater," a charge leveled on the relentlessly anti-immigrant EWTN TV show, "The World Over" with Raymond Arroyo. [I responded to Mr. Weigel at the time](#) [2]. It is one thing to believe bishops should, like monks, withdraw from the world and abstain from highlighting any political consequences of their religious convictions. It is another to endorse the Fortnight for Freedom, called to draw attention to the issue of religious liberty, and then condemn the Mass at the border. The inconsistency is too obvious to require much comment. Not for the first time, Weigel "and now Hahn" places a political agenda in front of religious conviction.

Hahn also seems upset that, in May, a group of bishops held a Mass on Capitol Hill and then met with senior congressional leadership to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform. It is worth noting that, in this and other instances, our bishops are some of the only people who lobby Congress but not on their own behalf. Big corporations head to the Ways and Means Committee seeking special tax breaks. Lobbyists approach budget and finance and appropriations committee members seeking special treatment. The bishops went to lobby Congress on behalf of people who are desperately poor, don't have any lobbyists, but whose presence in this country raises an obvious moral issue: Are these undocumented immigrants our brothers and sisters or not? The answer to that question was dramatically demonstrated at the Mass in Nogales, when Cardinal Sean O'Malley and Bishop Gerald Kicanas served Holy Communion through the slats of the border fence to Mexican Catholics on the other side. No political boundary can trump the bond we share in Christ Jesus.

This bond we share with fellow communicants, of course, does not limit the range of Catholic moral concern. We should be concerned about the poor and marginalized whether they be Catholic or not. Hahn does not see much value in this, writing:

*The bishops' push for comprehensive immigration reform is curious still because scores of new immigrants from Latino countries probably won't boost the church's waning numbers as well as the bishops might think. Bishops are likely hopeful that more immigrants might fill empty pews, but a 2013 survey from the left-leaning Public Religion Research Institute found otherwise. The percentage of Hispanic "nones" has doubled to 12 since 1990. PRRI compared Hispanic adults to their childhood religious affiliations and found that Catholic affiliation drops by 16 percentage points. Similarly, a 2013 Gallup poll reported, "Catholics in the U.S. today are suffering from an identity shortfall among Hispanics younger than the age of 30."*

If the immigrants are not going to remain Catholic, then to hell with them? Is that what Hahn is suggesting? Cf. Galatians 3:28.

The real issue for Hahn, however, is that he believes the bishops are over-stepping their competence. He writes:

*But how border security is handled? doesn't seem to be in a bishop's bailiwick. Prelates and priests ought to minister to immigrants, illegal or otherwise, but they have no moral authority when it comes to the specifics of policy. When Wenski and others try to shut down discussion on a specific policy matter, it gives a whole new meaning to Catholic guilt. Good Catholics can disagree about whether to have comprehensive or piecemeal immigration reform and dare not ask their spiritual shepherds for forgiveness when they do.*

The phrase "no moral authority when it comes to the specifics of policy," misunderstands the nature of moral reasoning. Obviously, at the level of first principles, the bishops' moral authority is more clear. "Thou Shalt Not Kill" is not up for debate. But, moral agents and certainly moral leaders cannot think their job is done when they have stated incontrovertible principles. Prudential judgment is required to apply all principles, but they must and can be applied in ways that are consistent and serious. Besides, prudence is itself a virtue.

This issue is not new. During the USCCB debate over the Affordable Care Act, Cardinal Francis George was president of the USCCB. The principal issue facing the bishops was whether or not the ACA provided for government funding of abortion. Their lawyers, and others, said it did while other legal analysts said it did not. That is a finding of fact. But, Cardinal George was quite right to insist that the bishops' have the obligation to determine the moral significance of legislation.

Similarly, in 1964, Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle of Washington delivered an invocation at an interracial symposium at Georgetown University. The Civil Rights bill was facing a filibuster in the U.S. Senate. O'Boyle said, "At this moment, the Senate of the United States is considering legislation to implement these rights of man. Enlighten the minds of these, our elected representatives, so that they may prevail over error and prejudice. Strengthen their wills, so that they may vote what is right and just, disregarding unworthy pressures." Now, a cloture motion is a procedural vote, a parliamentary maneuver, that is, about as far from a first moral principle as one can get. But, the procedural vote had moral significance and O'Boyle was unafraid to invoke his moral authority to back the vote for cloture.

Let us take a final example. The Catholic Church has long taught workers are entitled to a just wage. Now, one may need to analyze data from the Departments of Commerce and Labor to ascertain precisely what constitutes a just wage and bishops have no special competence at data analysis. But, if one economist holds that a just wage is whatever the market determines it should be, and another says that in order to provide for one's family, pay one's bills, and save a bit for retirement, a just wage should be, say, \$15., the first economist can, rightly, be deemed to have misapplied the Church's moral teaching. As St. John's University theologian Meghan Clark famously observed, the need for prudential judgment is not a get-out-of-jail-free card. Moral reasoning may start at the level of abstract first principles, and bishops as teachers must clearly enunciate those principles, but as pastors, they are also called to see that those principles are enfolded in policy specifics. This is not beyond their competence.

Hahn's final paragraph betrays his utter lack of understanding regarding Pope Francis. He writes, "The bishops' lobbying hasn't moved the needle when it comes to Mass attendance, so they might want to get back to evangelizing." Raising their voices on behalf of the undocumented and the unemployed, and the unborn, and all those who are relegated by the society to the margins such that they get an "un" in front of their group is precisely *how* we are called to evangelize. Our Catholic commitment to the real, lived situation of immigrants is not an add-on, it is integral to our proclamation of the Gospel. But Hahn apparently missed the Master's question, "Who would give his son a stone when he asks for bread?" The undocumented need bread, both real,

edible bread and the yet more real, living bread come down from heaven. If you offer them one without the other, you miss what Pope Francis is saying and, ignoring the latter, become an NGO, or, ignoring the former, become a pious fraud concerned only with the appointments of the sacristy. If Hahn took a moment to actually listen to what Cardinal O'Malley, Archbishop Wenski and other bishops who have actually worked with immigrants are saying, instead of trying to deny them their right to say it, he would hear the voice of Jesus: "Come unto me, you who are heavy laden, and I shall give you rest." Instead, Hahn repeats rightwing talking points and facile moral reasoning to obfuscate the clear teaching of the Church on the rights of migrants. He is not alone in this, to be sure, but regrettably, he has become an exemplar of U.S. Catholics who seem incapable of even seeing the beauty of the Gospel, and the freshness of true evangelization, if it gets in the way of their politics.

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