

Sen. Rubio at CUA

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 24, 2014 | Distinctly Catholic

[Senator Marco Rubio of Florida gave a speech yesterday](#) [1] at the Catholic University of America in which he focused on the importance of family as a bedrock of society and an incubator of values. The event was co-sponsored by the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies, where I serve as a visiting fellow, and the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Much of Sen. Rubio's speech was unimpeachable. He rightly stated that, "Too often in modern politics, debates about our values have been viewed as either wedges to win elections or unnecessary distractions to be avoided. But the truth is that the social and moral well-being of our people has a direct and consequential impact on their economic well-being." And, he spoke about what he termed a "success sequence":

In America, if you get an education, find a good job, and wait until marriage to have children, your chances of achieving economic security and professional fulfillment are incredibly high. In fact, if everyone in America lived lives that went in this order, in the order I've just outlined, some estimates are that the poverty rate would be cut by an estimated 70 percent.

I am more allergic to the word "success" than the Senator. Especially in a speech at a Catholic university, where every room has a crucifix, it has too much of a scent of the Prosperity Gospel for me. But, Rubio is undoubtedly correct in focusing on the demonstrable relationship between basic family structures, education, employment and future economic security and human flourishing. And, he is right also, to note that society as a whole cannot flourish if the individuals who constitute it do not flourish.

The problem for Rubio was one he acknowledged but did not seem to identify as a problem. He said:

That's why reinvigorating the values behind the success sequence begins by reinvigorating the institutions that teach and reinforce these values. It is through our roles as parents, as neighbors, as volunteers and as members of faith communities that we can have the greatest influence on the social and moral wellbeing of our people.

Societal breakdown is not a problem that the government alone can solve, but it is also not one the government can afford to ignore. We need leaders willing to use the platform of public office to call attention to the impact societal breakdown is having on our nation.

If the issue is so important, is the most the government can do is utilize the "platform of public office to call attention" to the problem? Are there no policies that might ameliorate the roadblocks to stronger family structures, better schools, fewer out-of-wedlock births, and more secure employment? Sen. Rubio repeated his proposal to increase the child tax credit to \$2,500. He put in a plug for tuition tax credits for private and religious schools. He urged flexible work hours. But, in a speech touted as a "major policy address," there was not much policy at all, and what little policy there was came right of the rack of perennial GOP talking points. It was fluff. Not wrong. Not offensive. But, not particularly substantive.

The problem with the speech is, in a sense, the problem the GOP has generally: By becoming the anti-

government party, they have a difficult time articulating solutions to problems facing the nation. If Rubio thinks the key thing for politicians is to use the bully pulpit to call attention to the problem, he need look no further than President Obama to see how that works: Whatever else you think about Obama, he has not been shy about discussing the importance of families, the need for fathers to play a role in their children's lives, and for young women to avoid getting pregnant before they are ready to raise a child.

The Democrats suffer from the opposite tendency of presuming there is a political policy fix for long-term cultural and demographic changes. Rubio argued for less federal interference in the administration of social programs to alleviate poverty, with greater discretion going to the state and local levels, as well as to non-governmental civic society actors. I was surprised that he did not take a swipe at the Obama administration on account of its penchant for making life more difficult for conservative civic society actors like the Catholic Church. Nor did he speak about the venerable Catholic principle of subsidiarity and why it rings true even to non-Catholics. But, the problem Republicans face when invoking subsidiarity is that they can't point to any GOP mayors or governors who are successfully implementing a range of policy ideas at the state and local levels with demonstrable success.

So, the big problem Rubio identified is truly a big problem. The differential between kids who grow up in intact families, get a good education, find a job, and wait until they are married to have children really perform much better in life and encounter more human happiness than those who don't. We have all read Robert Putnam. But, compared to the size of the problem, both parties seem to have pretty puny proposals.

The panel discussion after the Senator's speech got into some deeper, more interesting and more fruitful, weeds than he did. I will post the video of that session as soon as it is online. One wishes he had stayed around to participate in that discussion, or at least to hear it. I do not expect a politician to be an expert in every field, but they are well advised to expose themselves to ideas that are not their own, to critiques of their own ideas, and to the exchange of ideas that follows. Sen. Rubio's speech was decidedly underwhelming and if he wishes to gain some gravitas, he should stick around and hear what the experts have to say.

Most of the rest of the media has focused on Rubio's comments about same-sex marriage, which he opposes, and specifically his willingness to point out the bizarre intolerance of those who claim to champion tolerance. It is strange that gay rights activists demand tolerance of their ideas but are so unwilling to grant a similar tolerance to more traditionally minded people. Not for the first, or the last, time, does politics invite a type of intellectual hypocrisy that is as astounding as it is depressing.

Sen. Rubio is clearly considering a run for the White House. He has some work to do before he can be considered a top-tier candidate. His delivery was uninspired, although in the brief question-and-answer session, he was animated, friendly, engaging. The Rubio we saw in the Q-&-A is the Rubio we need to see all the time. (Although, given the almost universal disappointment in Obama, let the American people not make the mistake again of confusing the ability to give a great speech with the ability to be a great president!) And, if he were willing to challenge some of his own parties policy prejudices on the important issues he addressed, he could really become a compelling candidate. He has a great personal story. You can tell he is a fun person to be around. The potential is there but, based on his performance yesterday, at present he is not ready for prime time.

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[1] <http://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2014/7/rubio-delivers-address-on-values-at-catholic-university>