

Notes From Across The Atlantic

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FIRST THINGS FIRST

The first thing to be said about religion and public life is that religion and public life – especially as the latter is taken to mean politics – is not the first thing. There are things such as the gift of life, the wonder of being, and of Being, the joys and duties of love, devotion to the truth and the awareness of mortality. These are the permanent things that we expect to be brought into focus on solemn occasions, such as a memorial service for a friend who has died. That is no doubt why there was such a negative reaction when what was billed as a memorial service for the late Senator Paul Wellstone was turned into a raucous political rally. More than 20,000 people turned out for the event in the stadium of the University of Minnesota; when Walter Mondale and Bill Clinton were shown on the huge television monitors, the crowd cheered; when Senator Trent Lott and other Republicans were shown, the air was filled with booing. One speaker brought the crowd to frenzied shouts of approval when he told the Republicans present that they should support Democrat Mondale for the U.S. Senate in order to “honour” Wellstone. The treasurer of Wellstone’s campaign gave voice to sacralized politics by declaring, “We can redeem the sacrifice of his life if you help us win this election for Paul Wellstone.” Almost all the commentary on the event was critical, but most commentators limited themselves to the atrociously bad manners and partisan meanness on display. But behind the manners and meanness was something more ominous, something like idolatry. These people really do believe that politics is the first thing. They are typically liberals rather than conservatives. The left is prone to the view that politics can fix what is wrong with the world. Politics, they believe, is about power, and the problems of the world are the result of the wrong people with the wrong ideas having power. The remedy is that they and their ideas should have the power. Conservatives, by way of contrast, are inclined to speak of human nature and what they call the human condition, the latter being marked by glories and foibles, and by a propensity for madness, mistakes and evil. Politics is not a utopian project, never mind a religion; it is simply the necessary task of restraining wrong, incrementally advancing an approximate justice and the deliberative accommodation of differences within the bond of civility. One columnist referred to the Wellstone memorial/rally as a sacrilege. I expect that many, perhaps most, of the people there would simply be puzzled by that assertion. Sacrilege assumes an understanding of the sacred, and they were celebrating what is sacred for them. The occasion was an unabashed, full-throated, vulgar declaration that politics is the first thing. They were there not to honour but to use the memory of Paul Wellstone in the service of their highest good, political power. It was wrong, it

was sad, it was ugly; but at this point in the long history of politics-as-religion, it was not entirely surprising.

LIDLESS EYES

I am frequently asked whether there is much Catholic criticism of “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” (ECT). The answer is in the negative. Not that all Catholics are terribly enthusiastic about it, but most think it is no big deal that Catholics are in productive dialogue with evangelical Protestants. After all, the Catholic Church is in dialogue with almost everybody. It comes with being catholic. But there are exceptions. Catholic Apologetics International (CAI), for instance, devotes 43 pages to critiquing an address I recently gave at Wheaton College in Illinois and concludes: “Fr. Neuhaus has shown himself to be an enemy of Christ, with a soothing voice and a flowery tongue that masks the Serpent’s hiss. He wears the clothing of a sheep, but like a ravenous wolf he seeks to dissolve the Holy Church, and like Esau, to sell Her precious pearls of truth for a bowl of false and unholy ecumenical porridge.” So you can see that some Catholics are not entirely approving of my work with ECT. I was not aware of CAI’s somewhat pointed reservations until they were brought to my attention by that notable blogger Mark Shea who is concerned about what he calls the Lidless Eye Crowd on the rightmost fringes of Catholicism. In my Wheaton address I, as usual, drew on the documents of Vatican II and statements of this pontificate such as *Dominus Iesus* (Jesus the Lord) and *Ut Unum Sint* (That They May be One), but that, in the view of CAI, is just the problem. In another long essay from CAI, we are told that “it appears that Vatican II, in intention but not in fact, did redefine the perennial teaching of the Church.” “That is to say that ‘the Spirit of Vatican II’, as it is interpreted and applied by the more progressive innovators . . . appears to be exactly in line with what the council itself intended to present.” The Church teaches that Protestants are damned; Vatican II says they have means of grace and may be saved. The Church says that Jews are collectively guilty of the death of Christ; Vatican II says not. The Church says that religious freedom is a pernicious heresy; Vatican II affirms religious freedom. On each point, the CAI document cites earlier councils, popes and saints in order to establish the “perennial teaching” of the Church. The unavoidable implication is that Vatican II was a false council and the pontificates of Paul VI and John Paul II are devoid of magisterial authority. Like his soulmates on the far left, the CAI author has no use for Newman’s understanding of the development of doctrine, an understanding explicitly endorsed by the Magisterium since Vatican II. Every so-called development is, in fact, a radical change, a contradiction, and an effort to reform the irreformable. That Vatican II and subsequent pontificates are heretical is a thought not to be entertained lightly by a Catholic. Our author writes, “Please God, may I be wrong about this. If ever there was a time that I wished to be corrected and proved wrong, this is it.” As it happens, in the essays on my work and on Vatican II, there is not the slightest indication that the author wishes to be corrected, never mind to be proved wrong. He entered into full

communion with the Catholic Church only recently, believing he had found the rock (as in monolith) of inflexible and sedentary truths. It seems he was not prepared for the Church of ongoing pentecostal stirrings of the Spirit leading into the fullness of the truth that will not be exhaustively understood until “we know even as we are known”. He seems to be saying, to paraphrase St. Augustine, “So late I knew you. So soon must I say goodbye.” Where he might go from here, God only knows. Having put the burden of proof on those who believe that the Catholic Church has not fallen into heresy, we hope he will not present himself as a Catholic apologist. In any event, the answer to the question whether there are Catholic critics of ECT is yes, but they are not very. If they are very Catholic, they are not very critical; and if they are very critical, they are not very Catholic.

PRO-CHOICE?

Columnist Maggie Gallagher points out the obvious, because it obviously is not obvious to some politicians: Most doctors don't want to do abortions and abortionists want to make money. So the abortionists locate their “services” in urban areas where the traffic is brisk. NARAL, the radical pro-abortionist lobby, complains that “Eighty-four percent of counties in the United States do not have an abortion provider.” Instead of a campaign to raise money in order to subsidize charitable rural abortion clinics, NARAL and its allies are campaigning to force hospitals to do abortions. Catholic hospitals are often the only ones in rural areas, and they spend an unreimbursed \$2.8 billion per year in providing health care to the rural poor. In addition to its anti-Catholic appeal, the NARAL campaign aims to make abortion respectable as a “reproductive health service”, although most people might think abortion is not a boost for reproduction and does not improve health. In response to the campaign, Congress has taken up the Abortion Non-Discrimination Act. It states quite simply, “No hospital should be forced by government to perform abortions that violate its core beliefs and tenets.” It might be dubbed a pro-choice law, but of course NARAL and ACLU are fighting it tooth and nail. They are pro-choice only about some choices. But they are very dependably anti-Catholic.

VICTORY IN NEVADA

Had the vote gone the other way, you may be sure it would have made the front pages and evening news. As it happened, there was hardly a media mention of Nevada's overwhelming approval of a state constitutional amendment making it clear that marriage means the union of a man and a woman. Nevada is the 36th state to take this step, just two short of the 38 states needed to ratify the Federal Marriage Amendment. Matt Daniels, president of the Alliance for Marriage, says, “As we've seen repeatedly, our side wins every time the debate over marriage is taken out of the hands of the activist lawyers and the courts. Let's all look forward to the day when the Federal Marriage Amendment will allow the democratic

process to finally settle this struggle for future generations of Americans.” But, of course, the gay activists and their lawyers are not about to give up. They are expecting a court victory in Massachusetts and have declared their intention to use it as a wedge for forcing same-sex “marriage” on the other 49 states. The friends of representative democracy should not be planning on an early retirement.

THINK LOW

Some of the most intelligent writing about physician-assisted suicide (PAS) has been done by Wesley J. Smith. He says he is asked by liberals why they should oppose PAS. “I can summarize a big reason in just three letters: HMO.” He notes that liberals usually hate HMOs. The drugs used in assisted suicide cost about \$40, while the care required to help suicidal patients not to want to commit suicide may run to \$40,000 or more. “Reporters, who are usually eager to expose potential financial conflicts of interest in other public policy issues, tend to be blind to the economic stakes in the assisted suicide controversy,” Smith writes. “Yet the realization that assisted suicide will, in the end, be largely about money is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.” He notes that the Oregon assisted-suicide law does not compel any doctor or HMO to participate in killing people but only Catholic HMOs have emphatically said no. Indeed, some Kaiser/Permanente Northwest’s doctors are participating, and a Kaiser executive memo urges its doctors to lend a hand in the suicide also of people who are not their own patients, which would seem to be in violation of the Oregon law. “If assisted suicide ever became nationalized and a routine ‘medical treatment’,” Smith writes, “significant money could be saved - and hence made - by the HMO industry.” He quotes Derek Humphry, co-founder of the Hemlock Society, who in a recent book asserts that money is the “unspoken argument” in favor of legalizing assisted suicide. “Hundreds of billions of dollars” could be saved, Humphry says, making economics the driving force behind the push to give the old and debilitated a final push. When Midge Decter was on our staff, she would listen patiently to my theories about why somebody or the other was advocating this or that obvious wrong. Finally she would say, “The problem with you is that you don’t think low enough.” Thanks to Wesley Smith for helping us to think low about the advocacy of doctor-assisted suicide.

THE AMERICAN LIBERAL

An April Falcon Doss writes to the Washington Post about sending her daughter to a private school: “For a card-carrying liberal, I was surprisingly unapologetic about our decision. Why should I sacrifice our daughter’s future to an abstract principle? I wasn’t up to battling the school system about class size, curriculum and extracurricular activities. And by the time any changes could be made, our daughter would have already missed out on a vibrant education.” In the online

“Opinion Journal”, James Taranto comments that this is the very definition of an American liberal, someone who is willing to sacrifice the future of other people’s children to an abstract principle. Of course that’s not fair to all liberals but...