



Catholic Tea Served Cold and Decaffeinated

Go to most college campuses today and you will find religion a much neglected subject. At secular institutions, it is regarded as, at best, a refined taste, reserved for those nerdy types who seek fulfillment (one almost never hears of salvation) in another world. For the intellectually curious, there are courses in Comparative Religion, which are probably about as stimulating as courses in Anatomy and Physiology taught by Mrs. Grundy. Or Contemporary Theology, taught by Sister Wendy Trendy.



The sad thing is the situation is not a whole lot different at most so-called Catholic colleges. If you are looking for Catholic Lite, you have a fair number of schools to choose from. If you take your Catholicism straight, your choices are narrowed considerably. And if you want to find Catholic values reflected in departments other than Theology — in Politics, for example — you may find yourself tilting at windmills.

I walked a few months ago into the office of the gentleman who runs the New Hampshire Institute of Politics at Saint Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire. I had spoken to him and others there in the past about the noticeable lack of any Catholic themes in the speakers program. I decided to raise the issue again.

“Do you make any attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff here?” I asked. “Or does the wheat even get equal time?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” the director replied.

“Do you make any effort to separate truth from error with at least a slight bias in favor of truth?”

“That’s for up there,” he said, motioning with his head to a point further up the hill, perhaps to the administration building, perhaps to the Philosophy or Theology departments.

“Don’t you think a Catholic college should have Catholic values reflected even in its Politics department?” I asked.

“Well, we’re open to all points of view,” he replied with the voice of a cold, gray academic who might regard Jesus Christ respectfully as one of the world’s great religious leaders, on a par with Mahatma Gandhi, Billy Graham, and the Sheik of Something or Other.

“Is it just by accident, then, that you have had more speakers warning of the threat to future generations from global warming than speakers pointing out that a pretty big chunk of the very next generation is being systematically eliminated by abortion?” He looked surprised that anyone would question that.

“Yeah,” he said.

Well, the college last evening (November 18) had a well known Catholic speaker — even a pro-life Catholic speaker — Raymond Flynn, former Mayor of Boston and former U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican, who addressed a small gathering at the school’s Institute of Politics on the subject of young



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Catholics in the public arena. His talk brought to mind Winston Churchill's observation of a certain public speaker: "He spoke without a note, and nearly without a point."

He spoke about "social justice" in terms as vague as one might have expected from the late Dwight Eisenhower. They were mostly glittering generalities, though he did speak favorably of his own successful efforts to establish rent control in Boston, a regime that was later ended by voter referendum. He spoke of the changing ethnicity of formerly Irish neighborhoods and of a Hispanic American who washed the sidewalk in front of his home. He encouraged students to assert and fight for what they believe in, but the content of that belief appeared to be a matter of profound indifference to an Irish Catholic who had represented the United States to the Vatican as recently as the 1990s. It was as if he had been baptized in Eisenhower ambiguity, suggesting, as Ike had put it: "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious belief — and I don't care what it is."

A lifelong Democrat, Flynn said he no longer felt welcome in the Democratic Party and had never felt welcome in the Republican Party. It seemed to me he was tiptoeing around an issue that loomed like the proverbial 800-pound elephant in the room that no one was noticing. At a time when babies are being aborted in the United States at the rate of about 4,000 a day, the former ambassador to the Vatican stood in front of a Catholic audience and spoke for nearly half an hour on social justice, mentioning specifically rent control and clean sidewalks. He was, to be sure, in favor of both.

I asked, during the Q&A that followed, if one reason he no longer felt welcome in the Democratic Party is that nearly every Democratic officeholder above the level of state representative, and even most of the "reps," are relentlessly pro-abortion, or "pro-choice" in politically correct language. And I asked if politically correct and socially required ambiguity on the issue of the salvation of souls had not robbed Catholics of an advantage they might otherwise have in bringing their issues into an effectively agnostic public arena. If Catholics are unclear about salvation — where it is to be found and how it may be obtained — why should people take them seriously about anything else?

"Look, I'm not a theologian," he protested. "I was asked to come here to talk about politics." Indeed. And he encouraged people to get involved and fight for ... whatever. He praised the Obama health care bill passed this year, though he lamented the abortion coverage provided therein. At some point he talked about labor union representation and improved working conditions for Boston's longshoremen. Beyond that, the specifics were hard to find. And a Catholic who represented the United States to the Vatican, when speaking to a predominantly Catholic audience at a nominally Catholic College, would not touch with a ten-foot pole the question of Catholics in the public arena being clear on the subject of salvation.

If abortion is not an appropriate issue to raise with a Catholic audience in America in the context of "social justice," neither, apparently, is same-sex "marriage," now the law in five of the six New England states (with Rhode Island the honorable exception). Sex education in the schools, with its imprimatur on homosexuality and acceptance of promiscuity, was also not mentioned. Heavy, burdensome taxation, the shipping of jobs overseas, the endless wars for a permanent peace, the abuse of prisoners and suspension of habeas corpus, torture disguised as "enhanced interrogation techniques" were also among the topics never touched. Is it any wonder that the Tea Party movement has left Catholic speeches about "social justice" quite in the dust?

Ambassador Flynn surely issued no clarion call to "establish all things in Christ," as the Apostle Paul exhorted. Years ago, a bishop in England noted ruefully that wherever Saint Paul went there was either a revival or a riot. "Wherever I go, they serve tea," he said.



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