

The Church Is Not an NGO

Brad Miner

Monday, June 10, 2019

An Italian priest visits our parish a few times a year to say Sunday Mass. He's remarkable: tall, ascetic, and very serious. When he elevates the host and then the chalice, they stay elevated longer than in the hands of any priest I've ever seen – almost to the point of seeming theatrical. But it's not. He is simply *reverent*. He's also a fine and courageous homilist, which is to say he's one of the only priests I've ever heard condemn abortion from the pulpit, and one of the few who takes the time to discuss what the Church actually teaches about moral and spiritual matters.

He recently spoke about holiness. I've heard other priests speak about that too, but never so starkly *against* the trend to present faith in the context of public policy: migration, pollution, poverty. I'm sure he's committed to an orthodox understanding of social justice, but, again, his homily was *against* an emphasis on social and economic issues that ignores Christ's call to holiness.

What struck me most was his insistence that, when the call to holiness is replaced by a call for social and economic justice, the Church risks presenting itself as a non-governmental organization (NGO), at which point it makes sense that folks stop coming to Mass.

When what seems to define a "good Christian" is volunteering and check-writing, when the assertion that "I'm religious in my own way" seems plausible, why wouldn't I sleep in on Sunday morning? Especially true, I suspect, for those who neither volunteer time nor contribute money.

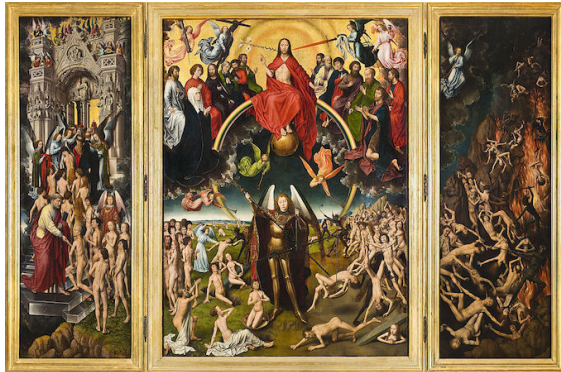
I was reminded again of the way H. Richard Niebuhr (of the Evangelical Synod of North America, d. 1962) described liberal Christianity: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."

And the crazy thing is, liberals not only empty the churches with their politicized rhetoric, they actually believe it's the only way to bring people back. So, the more people leave, the more vigorously liberals double down on the message that's driving them away.

Of course, one understands the allure of the social message, which is an extension of our Lord's teaching on discipleship in Matthew 25:

36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' **37** Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? **38** And when did we see you a stranger and welcome

you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."



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To some, that's ironclad proof of the liberal assertion that contemporary social action trumps traditional dogma. Who can stand against science and politics, which now offer objective solutions unavailable to preachers in 1st-century Palestine? Charity is best managed by governments and their NGO partners, and best administered in the spirit of the separation of Church and State. Let the smart people, the experts, take care of the poor.

Well, they've been working on that with energy in the United States since at least the 1930s. Correlation is not necessarily causation, but we ought at least to consider caution about any further expansion of social-welfare policies and ecclesiastical innovation, since their rise seems to track with the persistence of poverty and the decline of religious orthodoxy.

And there's no use anymore in saying the problem is more Protestant than Catholic. It's true, as James Simpson writes in *Permanent Revolution: The Reformation and the Illiberal Roots of Liberalism* ^[2] that "Sixteenth-century Protestantism ushered in a culture of permanent revolution, ceaselessly repudiating its own prior forms. Its rejection of tradition was divisive, violent, and unsustainable," but many Catholics throughout the West have pretty much embraced the same point of view – essentially the Marxist thesis-antithesis-synthesis; or in its cheerier version: *Day by day in every way I'm getting better and better*. That was the formulation of French psychologist Émile Coué, which sounds a whole lot better in the original, *Tous les jours à tous points de vue, je vais de mieux en mieux*– although only if you don't know French.

As Mr. Simpson puts it, every day and in so many ways, liberalism has "repeatedly and compulsively repudiated its own prior forms." It can't help itself; it can't stop itself.

Of course, when Marxists, neo- or otherwise, attempt to feed, clothe, and care for the poor, they mostly end up killing them by the millions: a brutal, un-Christian solution happening again in Venezuela – as ever, in the name of the poor.

As our Italian priest made clear, when you take out awe and reverence and the quest for holiness and heaven, focusing instead on ostensibly Utopian solutions to problems in the here and now, “religious” people become merely opinionated – engaged in debates about public policy: immigration, prison reform, Medicare and Social Security, the “environment” – the whole range of issues that attract or repel voters and define the political process.

We once when visited a pre-school in Manhattan when our older son was four – taking him, in other words, for an *interview*. The new head of school said: “I can’t wait to begin experimenting on these kids!” That reminded me of Newman’s famous line from his *Apologia*:

my battle was with liberalism; by liberalism I mean the anti-dogmatic principle and its developments. This was the first point on which I was certain. Here I make a remark: persistence in a given belief is no sufficient test of its truth; but departure from it is at least a slur upon the man who has felt so certain about it.

A slur on the man *and* his Faith.

***Image:** *The Last Judgment* by Hans Memling, c. 1470 [National Museum, Gdańsk, Poland]



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[2] *Permanent Revolution: The Reformation and the Illiberal Roots of Liberalism:*

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