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Five Things to Remember

by [Michael Sean Winters](#) | *Jun. 8, 2015*

Distinctly Catholic

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Every few days, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Media Relations sends reporters an email with the subject line "Five Things to Remember." They list various activities of the conference or highlight recent talks by bishops. The last item to remember is always "God loves you!" which is something we all need to remember. I am told that including this last item in every list of things to be remembered was the brainchild of Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, who watches over the USCCB from above now and is surely answering queries from the heavenly host.

As the bishops gather this week in St. Louis for their annual spring meeting, I should like to return the favor and here offer five things for the assembled bishops to remember.

1. The Indiana Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) debacle. The issue of religious liberty is an important one, but the brand has been ruined. You, dear bishops, were complicit in its ruination. You have too easily bought into a dire and histrionic narrative fed to you by people for whom religious liberty is not an issue but a livelihood, the lawyers who spend all their waking hours fretting about worst-case scenarios and who, regrettably, too often make common cause with Republican politicians only too willing to turn religious liberty into the latest battlefield in the culture wars.

A week or so ago, I watched on C-SPAN -- yes, some of us have lives so boring we watch C-SPAN - a discussion about religious liberty at the U.S. Constitution Center in Philadelphia. My friend Kristina Arriaga from the Becket Fund was on script, as was the man who represented

Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. But columnist Michael Gerson was the third panelist, and he reminded the audience that religious liberty was not a culture war "issue," it was and is one of the great accomplishments of the American experiment in self-government. Indeed.

It is anyone's guess if the Gerson's vision can be retrieved and if religious liberty can, again, be something that unites Americans. For starters, the bishops need to swear off any attempt to use RFRA laws to justify or promote discrimination against gays and lesbians. They need to be far more honest about the willingness of partisans on both sides to use the issue, or ignore the issue, for their ideological ends.



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Alabama, Arizona, Kansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Tennessee have all banned Sharia law, an obvious infringement on religious liberty, but all we hear from the ad hoc Committee on Religious Liberty is about the HHS contraception mandate, all the time. I would note that in Oklahoma, in an effort to make the law less obviously targeted at Muslims, the law bans all religious and foreign laws from consideration by the courts. Does that apply to canon law, too? If there is a legal fight between a bishop and a congregation over ownership of church property, a modern-day iteration of the trusteeism controversy that afflicted the Church in the early 19th century, do the bishops of Oklahoma agree that they cannot appeal to canon law?

If you want an issue to be seen as above the fray, as of transcendent concern and import, you have to treat it like it is above the fray. Also, at a time when Christians are being beheaded, complaining about filling out a form so that you do not have to do the thing you do not want to do seems ridiculous. Again, stop listening to the lawyers. Filling out the HHS form does not "trigger" anything. The law is the trigger.

2. Bishop Robert Finn is no longer the bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo. The days you can stay in office even if you commit an egregious failure to abide by your own rules for the protection of children, adopted more than 10 years ago at a similar spring meeting in Dallas, are over. There can be no back-sliding on the policies designed to ensure protection of children. No exceptions.

The bishops have come a long way since 2002. Most dioceses do abide by the Dallas Charter, and most children are safe in Church environments. Most perpetrators of child abuse are reported to the police and removed from ministry. But on an issue that has cost us so dearly, and not merely in pocket but in the confidence of our people, the need for constant vigilance is obvious. Now, Rome has gotten the message, and the bridge that was once a bridge to far, the removal of a bishop who does not follow the policies, has been crossed.

3. The Irish referendum. I wrote about this issue shortly after the vote to legalize same-sex marriage in Ireland and stand by what I wrote at the time. Most especially, continued efforts to demonize gays and lesbians will only cause our young people to leave in droves. Instead of fulminating about a "civilizational crisis," the bishops are well advised to have a sober conversation about what it means to be an employer in a society that has long accepted a definition of marriage different from our own and has now made that definition different in a very precise way. It is not the end of the world. It is a challenge. Meeting that challenge requires the bishops to remember other parts of the catechism than the section on homosexuality, things like the Church's long support for access to affordable health care.

The late Cardinal Francis George was not wrong to worry that equality, always a powerful engine in American political and social life, has become a steamroller that will level all in its path, producing a secular homogenization in which there will be little room for the Church. But that worry must not be blown out of proportion. Equality is still a thing to be celebrated and sought, something our young people understand, even, perhaps especially, when that equality is extended to segments of the population that have historically been the object of prejudice and bigotry.

Our young people are not wrong in this. And, as a matter of strategy, those who are excessively worried about the cultural effects of equality need to ask themselves how they will slow the steamroller down, or even apply the brakes, unless they are on the vehicle. If the bishops follow the guidance of our friends at First Things and continue to draw a line in the sand on the issue of same-sex marriage and fight every battle, even the ones that have already been lost, they will deserve the marginalization they will receive. At a deeper level, the leaders of the Church throughout the West need to take five steps back and rethink how they discuss human sexuality generally and homosexuality specifically. The "reality check" in Ireland is a reality check for the U.S. Church, too.

4. Pope Francis, in a meeting with young people in Sarajevo on Saturday, repeated one of the most persistent themes of his pontificate, calling on the young people to build bridges, not walls. The whole culture warrior approach is about building walls. Here is the principal script-writer for the culture warrior team, George Weigel, writing about the synod last autumn: "The experience of the 20th and early 21st centuries suggests that there is an iron law built into the Christian encounter with modernity, according to which Christian communities that maintain a clear sense of their doctrinal and moral boundaries survive and even flourish, while Christian communities whose doctrinal and moral boundaries become porous wither and eventually die." I do not think a bridge is a porous thing, but I also think a bridge crosses boundaries, it does not make them more difficult to cross. I understand that the noun "modernity" is made to carry a lot of ideological weight in Weigel's sentence, but another one of Pope Francis' themes is that the Church should have done with ideologies.

If the bishops look around American society, and at the lives of many of the people in the pews,

they will see a culture that desperately needs bridge-builders. Whether we are talking about racism, or gender issues, or income inequality and the inequality that is deeper than mere economics, the cultural and social deficit that has grown up between the haves and the have-nots, or America's foreign policy in a dangerous world, or the criminal justice system, take your pick, America is deeply divided and seems exhausted from trying to fix what ails.

The bishops need to put down the latest issue of *First Things* and pick up Robert Putnam's "Our Kids." They need to ask themselves what role the Church can play in bridging the divides in American life, in reaching out to the millions of people who are hurting and hopeless, the people in need of a "field hospital." The Church, especially in our large cities, is one of the few institutions that crosses all income, ethnic, racial and other socioeconomic divisions. By bringing the Gospel to our neighborhoods, mostly using our hands and hearts, we can not only make a difference for the common good, we can follow the evangelizing methodology proposed by the Holy Father. Oh, and when some right-wing cranks complain about Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services or the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, tell them to shut up.

5. God loves you.



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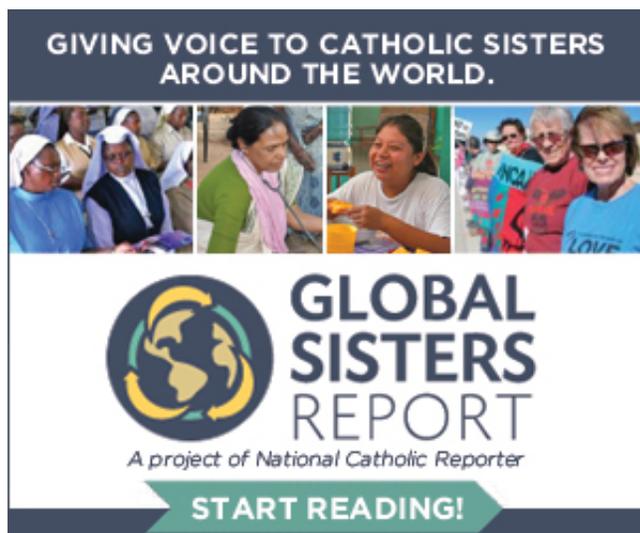
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