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(Unedited Transcript)

You're all well aware that this is a forum on public morality, and when we got the word and the list of questions and so on, I began thinking. And I decided to first establish an unlikely partnership between John Courtney Murray, who fashioned an American public theology, and Geno Baroni, who was never accused of being an intellectual, but fashioned his own American public morality.

Murray, the Jesuit theologian, arguably the outstanding theologian of the twentieth century in the United States; Murray, the Catholic intellectual. Baroni, the Catholic social activist. Murray, the principal architect of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom. Baroni, the practical mechanic who assembled all the parts of a public morality in a toolkit that I'll call "the speech," which Larry O'Rourke has packaged for posterity in that invaluable book that he wrote and each of you received when you came in.

In an article entitled "Citizen Murray," it was in the "Boston College" magazine about five years ago, or a little longer, Leon Hooper writes that Father Murray pointed out that Pope John XXIII had listened while the theologians who gathered in Rome as consultants to the fathers of the second Vatican Council freely talked, and had an even keener ear for the voice of the simple faithful. That's John XXIII, the keen ear.

Pointing out that Pope John XXIII encouraged the raising of new questions that were both theological and pastoral, even political, Murray said that -- I'm quoting -- "The symbol of him," of Pope John, "might will be the question mark; surely, a unique symbol for a pope."

"Murray himself became a listener. He employed the language of natural law, not theological language and theological categories, that could prove to be divisive in a pre-cumenical America, to encourage religious intellectuals to emerge from their respective ghettos, to talk to one another about human dignity and human freedom." Murray used a natural law vocabulary to do that, not a theological vocabulary.

As Hooper points out, the church in which Murray grew up and received his theological training insisted that the elites impose religious and moral demands on the masses, for their own protection, for the protection of the masses. By church law, the elites were to be intolerant of differing voices, particularly if those voices belonged to the people at large.

Murray, according to Leon Hooper, countered with what he, Murray, called "a great act of faith in the moral possibilities of the people," an idea he developed within the Anglo-American political tradition.

As a student of the development of Murray's thought, Leon Hooper observes -- and I'm quoting -- "given the complexity of modern social life, the silencing of voices that might have something to contribute to our common life is social suicide. If Murray taught us

anything," says Hooper, "it was to not fear those voices. For in them, a dynamic, creative God is to be found."

And to this, of course, Citizen Baroni would add a warm "Amen."

Citizen Baroni speaks to us in Larry O'Rourke's chapter 15, titled, "Geno's Parables." And there, as I mentioned earlier, you'll find "the speech."

If you read it, you'll notice that the question mark would be an apt symbol for Baroni. "The speech" is sprinkled with question marks. This one just for a moment, and this is lifted right out of "the speech":

"Why can't we have a multi-diverse, a pluralistic value system way of life, and respect these life systems" -- of minority communities -- "and stop being so competitive, and develop a mutual interdependence? Can we do it? Is that the only option, alternative to conflict and chaos?"

"Can we find a new identity? Can we find a new national purpose? Can we create a society that meets the human needs of the poor, which is always a test of standards?"

Well, the planners of this symposium raised more than a few questions for the consideration of those of us who are preparing papers. It's a list as long as your arm. For example: "How would Geno Baroni frame the role of religion in 2005 to reinforce a progressive agenda?"

Again, since he, Geno, viewed the federal budget as a moral document and told us that every economic and social issue is a moral issue; would not Geno therefore possibly have framed solutions more in terms of a public morality, than in terms of faith-based initiatives?

Perhaps he would. Certainly he would be emphasizing the moral dimension, the public morality issue. But he might, in his canny, practical way, see faith-based as a category that is out there waiting to be used for good, on-the-ground purposes.

No one knew better than Geno that politics is the art of compromise. Some religious people have been and remain skeptical about the workability of President Bush's faith-based initiatives since they were first proposed. Some fear that religious principle will be compromised in the process. And in my view, that need never happen.

Others fear that the establishment clause -- or better, the nonestablishment clause -- of the first amendment to our Constitution will be violated if government gives money to religiously motivated organizations, to assist them in rendering social service to the needy.

This in my view is not a well-grounded fear. Roman Catholicism will not become the established religion of the United States if the federal government funnels federal dollars through Catholic charities USA in an effort to help the hungry and homeless. Nor will any other denomination become established as a controlling religious entity just because that denomination's social service arm is strengthened by an infusion of federal funding. There is no separation of church and society in the US. Nor was such a separation ever intended by our founding fathers.

Even though we speak of the separation of church and state, the “wall of separation” is a misleading metaphor that appears nowhere in the Constitution. When permitted to function as a wall separating government from any involvement at all with private faith-based religiously motivated organizations, the First Amendment is being misunderstood, and misapplied.

There is a time-honored, quite conservative principle in the tradition of Catholic social thought, that Marcy alluded to a moment ago, and should be brought into play in the current debate as to whether government money can or should be channeled into religious charities. This principle is intended to keep government in its proper place; active or inactive, depending on the circumstances. It’s known as the principle of subsidiarity.

It applies to any form of organization, not just to government. In essence, it states that no decisions or actions should be taken at a higher level of organization, that can be taken as efficiently and effectively at a lower level, closer to the people that will be affected closer to the ground.

The application of this principle depends on circumstances. It forecloses on big government in cases our government be walking over lower-level decision-makers to get good things done. Conversely, it would require and fully justify government action in circumstances where programs good for the people should be in place, but the resources of lower-level organizations fall far short of the need and only government is big enough to make up the difference.

I think Geno Baroni would be pleased to see the principle of subsidiarity included in any set of what I call “Baroni principles.” And you have in your book, your conference book, there’s an article I did on “Baroni Principles for Social Action.”

The federal government can fund the Salvation Army’s coffee and blankets, but not its hymn books. We’re not talking about Lutheran sandwiches, or Baptist bandages, when we speak of religiously-based aid to the poor. We are indeed talking about poor people, and how society might reach out to them. If faith-related hands are there right now, at the ready so to speak, why not give them the wherewithal to extend themselves in the direction of urgent human need?

In examining the list of possible reasons, don’t fail to consider religious discrimination. It’s easier to invoke a constitution and to admit to anti -- you fill in the blank -- wherever you notice a religion or a religious organization that is doing good -- not well -- doing good, and could be doing more -- not better -- and would be doing more if those who distrust or discriminate against that religion were not so intent in blocking access to the federal faucets.

We didn’t hear much about the poor in the first seven years of the Clinton presidency. Now, in the George W. Bush presidency, we’ve been hearing about meeting the needs of the poor at one remove from government. That is, through nongovernmental agencies that happen to be faith-based, and are still in close touch with the needy. They know how to reach the poor.

The White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives is ready to joint-venture with them. Now, has anyone heard the poor say that they don’t want to see this happen?

Yet we know that religion can be co-opted for partisan political purposes. I don't have to give you chapter and verse on that. You have to wonder, for example, about "Justice Sunday," last April 24, when a televised simulcast to churches to rally religious conservatives who wanted to deny Democrats the ability to mount a filibuster barring votes on President Bush's judicial nominees, prompted "Business Week" to editorialize that -- I'm quoting:

"The rancor surrounding the event has become so unseemly that it raises a vital question: after a quarter of a century of arguing about the growing impact of religion on American politics, couldn't this intermarriage of politics inadvertently take its toll on religion? The religious community should remain involved. That's the right and responsibility of every American. But what makes religion so potent is its ability to cross divisions like racial, regional, and party lines.

"So, when religion is used in the exclusionary manner we are increasingly seeing in some political quarters, it just seems like divide and conquer politics, as usual." That's "Business Week."

Now Geno Baroni would indeed be wary of all that, but wise enough to work his way through it for the advantage of the poor and the powerless. Remember, he was convinced -- a phrase he often used -- that "action follows teaching, by way of experience." There's always been an uneasy intersection between religion and politics in America, but look at the trophies of success religion helped to win in the abolition movement, in the civil rights and antiwar movements. What might religion be doing today in the matter of minimum wage, universal health insurance, and in so many other issues that come to the mind of anyone who is the least bit concerned for the common good.

In the Baroni spirit of the respect for the values and concerns of the little people, I think we should be asking them, the little people, what they need for their fair share of participation in the good life.

Hurricane Katrina, as you heard earlier, brought the voices of many of the little people to the attention of the nation, by means of radio and television. And those voices spoke of immediate, urgent needs. The lives behind those voices told stories of dreams long deferred, justice long denied.

I think Baroni would be all over the faith-based initiators of help for poor and homeless people, Katrina evacuees and others, to use the existing faith-related institutional bases, to connect federal relief with those most in need. I think Baroni would be all over FEMA and other governmental entities; local, state, and federal, to demand more effective mitigation, more competent management, an improved coordination of the public response to need in time of crisis.

And it is not too much of a stretch in my view to think of Geno Baroni making these demands in a vocabulary of public morality. Recall that John Courtney Murray constructed moral arguments in language of the natural law. He identified that language in the vocabulary of our founders and framers: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." Why self-evident? Because they are available to human reason unaided by divine revelation.

As Leon Hooper states it, natural law is based on the moral law that God instilled in human nature at creation, rather than on the law given to the church in the dying and rising of Jesus. As such, it's available to all people of goodwill, regardless of their faith.

From that starting point, Murray developed an American public theology. And Baroni's American public morality would not be articulated in learned tomes. If he were around today, he would be exhibiting it in his personalized faith-based social activism. He would use the tools and strategies of community organization, focusing on the issues out of immediate concern to the people in the neighborhoods that he would be fighting to preserve.

Would abortion be one of the issues for Geno? It's an interesting question that a lot of people bring up. I'd say probably not. It would surely surface in the political campaigns waged by those in seeking elected office in order to serve the needs of the little people, as it did in the Carter campaign. It would not be a little people's issue. Baroni would play it down as a campaign issue while trying to figure out a way to prevent it from becoming destructive of the unity needed to move a progressive social agenda geared directly to the needs up a little people, to move that agenda forward.

If he developed a public morality vocabulary as Murray developed a public theology vocabulary, a door would be open to the argument that abortion is not really and certainly not exclusively a Catholic issue. I would argue that Catholic politicians should not be condemned and certainly not denied access to the Eucharist because of votes that fall short of the pro-life standards of the Catholic hierarchy.

Let me end this with what I might call a parting shot. I've often remarked that Geno Baroni never took the American automobile fully into account. Really, think about it. He did not reflect on the role of the automobile in destroying old neighborhoods, and this in two ways: first, by overloading the narrow streets of existing neighborhoods with parked and abandoned cars. And by providing easy access out of the city, into the suburbs, without breaking the link to city-based employment.

Nor did he appear to understand how the automobile became a substitute source of power, prestige, and a social mobility, for poor people who could have earned these advances the hard way, through education, apprenticeship, and discipline, had the reinforcing social structure been in place in the old neighborhoods, to sustain them.

Now there's an agenda for your next forum. Thank you.