

December 13, 2009
Fifth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

As I write these lines, more than a quarter-million people have signed the Manhattan Declaration, released this past November 20. I suppose I should be personally gratified, in the sense that never before have so many people agreed with me! I was, in fact, one of seven Orthodox Christians who signed the document prior to its publication.

There are several ways in which the Manhattan Declaration is significant.

The first, I suppose, is the content. This is a public and deliberately political (though not partisan) pronouncement on three points: It is pro-life, pro-marriage, and pro-religious freedom. Under these headings it makes specific affirmations about abortion, the scientific or medical use of human embryonic tissue, the proposed extension of legitimacy to sexual unions other than that between a husband and wife, and the limitations imposed on the State with respect to the conscience.

Second, the document is significant in the great variety of its authors and original signers, a group embracing members and leaders from several Christian bodies. Indeed, the Manhattan Declaration was endorsed by Christians very little disposed, as a rule, to append their names on documents described as "ecumenical."

My friend, for example, Dr. Albert Mohler, the President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was among the first to sign. Explaining the reason he determined to do so, Dr. Mohler wrote: "I want my name on that list. I surrendered no conviction or confessional integrity to sign that statement. No one asked me to compromise in any manner. I was encouraged that we could stand together to make clear that to come for one of us on *these* issues is to come for all. At the end of the day, I did not want my name missing from that list when folks look to see just who was willing to be listed."

Third, the Manhattan Declaration is significant in some of the public reaction to it. I don't mean the reviews of secular critics, of course, who detested the document's contents. Their assessments were uniformly predictable. Neither do I have in mind the insouciance of those Christians who, on principle, avoid politics. Nor am I thinking of those Christians whose ethical sympathies are filtered through a different weave (those, for instance, to whom executing

murderers is morally equivalent to murdering babies). Such reactions were entirely expected.

The critics I have in mind, rather, are those Christians who confessed agreement with the substance of the Declaration while declining to associate with the other signers. Their objections, I believe, are significant in the sense of deserving comment. Considerations of available space impose brevity here.

We may take the example of the Evangelical spokesman, John MacArthur, Jr. His complaint was very simple: The Manhattan Declaration scans only the symptoms of these social evils but neglects to address their root cause. That is to say, this document fails to proclaim the Gospel of salvation, which is the sole remedy for every social ill.

Substantially identical was the objection of the Orthodox Christian priest, Father Jonathan Tobias, who faulted the Declaration for not preaching repentance. This writer went even further, lampooning at length the document's form and rhetorical style. (Ironically, a somewhat softened Father Tobias has of late chastised James Carroll, for a similar mockery of it.)

The objections of MacArthur and Tobias are curious in their evident presumption that Christians, when they speak in public, should limit their discourse to the proclamation of the Gospel and the summons to repentance.

I suppose this is a legitimate view, though it is neither shared by many Christians over the centuries nor obviously favored by the prophets. Jonah, for instance, preached judgment—not repentance—at Nineveh, nor did his proclamation include one syllable of Good News. If this was true of Jonah, what shall we say of Nahum, whose own message to the Ninevites was just an expansion of Jonah's meager half-verse?

Respectfully, these objections to the Manhattan Declaration (including its rhetoric) could easily have been made against any one—and perhaps all—of the biblical prophets. Our modest Declaration, as a statement of social concern, invites the endorsement of Christians who share that concern. The matter is truly as plain as that.

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