

CL Remembers Albacete

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 27, 2015 Distinctly Catholic

Saturday night, I was in New York City to celebrate the memory of Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete with his friends at Comunione e Liberazione. They had a wonderful piano and violin duo that began the evening, followed by tributes to Lorenzo by his friends Professor Robert Pollack and documentary producer Helen Whitney. Helen also showed a video that brought together some of Lorenzo's commentary on her shows. They also invited me to speak. Here is the text of my remarks which I reprint here because I hope they speak to people who did not know Lorenzo too.

Thank you for inviting me to this wonderful remembrance of our dear friend Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete. This was not an easy talk to write in part because Cardinal Sean told all the best stories and jokes in his extraordinary homily at Lorenzo's funeral. The larger difficulty was that the person I wanted to ask for assistance was, of course, Lorenzo. I am not sure if you all have found this to be the case or not, but when I come up against an intellectual quandary, I feel Lorenzo's absence acutely: No one could get to the root of the matter with greater assurance and greater delight. But, when I find myself facing a spiritual quandary, I feel Lorenzo's presence in some ways more palpably than when he was alive. He was not always the best at returning phone calls, but now, when I am praying, I feel like he picks up the phone every time.

I met Lorenzo in 1992. A friend, the Polish journalist Anna Husarska, was writing an article about the pope for Vanity Fair and asked if there was anyone in Washington whom she should interview. I told her that I knew of, but had not met, a certain monsignor who was rumored to be close to the pope and his name was Monsignor Albacete. Anna arranged the interview and, as she explained it later, fell in love with Lorenzo on the spot. I should note that Anna is not a Catholic, not even a believer. She said he was smart and hilarious and irreverent and all the things we in polite, cosmopolitan society most celebrate. She went to Sarajevo on another assignment shortly thereafter and, upon her return, and in conjunction with the Feast of the Archangels, I threw a dinner party and invited Lorenzo. This was at a time in my life when I would throw five or six course dinners for eight or so people, changing wines with each course, which among other things assured about three hours at table with boisterous conversations. It goes without saying that he completely charmed us all. I too, like Anna, fell in love at first sight.

A couple of days later, I received a typed note from Lorenzo. I have saved it all these years. Let me share it with you.

Dear Mike:

Just a note to thank you for the invitation to greet Anna upon her return from Sarajevo, and to celebrate your feastday with your friends.

I really had a wonderful time last night, more perhaps than you can imagine. As I said, my involvement with the Pope, and my assignment to "his" Institute for the "Study of Marriage and Family" has put me in frequent contact with people whose ethos is the opposite of mine. Jacques Maritain once wrote that one is born conservative or liberal, or at any rate, it is something one can hardly control, since it is a matter of the heart. The thing to do, he said, is to train your intellect to become familiar with the opposite side in order to in some way guide your heart's direction. I have a very liberal, almost radical "heart," therefore I have tried to

understand the concerns of those who are not like me. Following this path, I came to the conclusion that I could not accept all the positions that came out of the liberal hearts of my closest friends (this was way back in the late 60's and early 70's). Unfortunately, many of my friends decided I had somehow sold out, and eventually gave up on me. Since then I think I have gone beyond those categories in what I guess observers would call a more 'mystical' direction (alas, another misunderstanding, but I suppose less painful than 'coward' or 'traitor' or 'opportunist,' all hurled at me at one time or another). Your 'carinosa acogida' last night, therefore, made me feel that I have not gone crazy, that my heart is still in the same place, and for a moment, I actually forgot my age.

Anyway, I thank God for the circumstances that led to our meeting, and look forward to enjoying a friendship in the time ahead. Please convey my gratitude to all your friends; they were a great company. I shall pray for you, Michael, especially to our Lady. You are a good man indeed.

Well, he was not entirely right about that last point – sometimes I am not good at all! But, this letter showed me something I had not seen at the dinner. Lorenzo had suffered, been ostracized even, for his faithfulness to both his own heart and to the Gospel. Later, he would be made to suffer by the machinations of prominent churchmen too! I noted above that he had displayed at dinner those personal attributes that appeal in cosmopolitan society, but suffering lacks all appeal in that realm. Here was not only charm, and intelligence, and wit, and a brilliant sense of humor; here was a mark of holiness and authentic humility. “No one can be truly holy without suffering,” Cordelia explains to Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited*. Lorenzo suffered in many ways, yet has anyone of us ever known someone who more fully lived out the Joy of the Gospel?

Over the years I also came to realize that while he possessed in abundance those qualities of personality that we associate with cosmopolitanism – an urbane wit, a voracious and comprehending familiarity with literature, an ease in conversation – these were not cultivated by him for their own sake. He had no intrinsic desire to be cosmopolitan. Instead, these gifts were cultivated out of that same faithfulness to his heart and to the Gospel. He was obviously and thoroughly a believer, but he was also obvious and thorough in his love for life. He loved literature because it is human. He loved laughter because it is human. He loved conversation because it is human. And he loved all that was human more deeply than most humanists because of his belief in the Incarnation and he loved the Incarnate Lord more than most Catholics because he loved what is human.

One cannot understand this quality of Lorenzo's evangelization without understanding something about Puerto Rico. Yes, his faith was brought to him first and foremost by his mother, but that faith was nurtured in a culture and in a place where faith is carried as if on the trade winds that perpetually caress the island. Puerto Ricans take enormous pride in the natural beauty of their island home. They devote enormous amounts of time and energy to their familial and social life and no one can understand Lorenzo without grasping his incredible devotion to his mother and brother. Puerto Ricans are a happy people. They grasp life in sacramental, relational understandings, not in our Anglo, transactional, consumerist mentality. I do not think we can understand Lorenzo's own happiness without understanding how it took root first in his native soil.

I was with Lorenzo on eight different occasions on the island, for his mother's funeral, five times during his tenure as President of the Catholic University in Ponce, for our dear friend +Roberto's installation as Archbishop of San Juan, and one other time when we simply happened to both be on the island. So many memories. Walking behind him in the midday sun as we processed up the steep Calle Cristo from the cathedral to Ballaja, where we celebrated +Roberto's installation Mass: Lorenzo was in his monsignor's cassock and surplice, it was a million degrees, and my job was to walk alongside with a towel and bottles of water, and to call 911 if he passed out. I remember sitting in a restaurant south of Mayaguez, looking out at the ocean, talking about his plans for the university. I remember standing outside the Bombanera, a dive of a restaurant in old San Juan that he especially loved, smoking our cigarettes and plotting. I remember going for a swim with Lorenzo and his friend Magda in a mangrove cay off the coast of the fishing village, La Parguera. It was during that

swim that he explained it was for just such times that he had been born by God's Providence into a family with the name Albacete – white whale. Our shared love for the island was mixed into the cement of our friendship.

This sacramental understanding of life was founded on the words of St. Paul to the Colossians. "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him." For Lorenzo, these words were supremely true and real. Lorenzo's allergy to attempts at apologetics that tried to cut the faith into bite-sized pieces, his hostility to any understanding of faith as primarily moralistic, most of all, any reduction of the faith to morals, these flowed from his keen awareness that such attempts missed the heart of the matter and hindered the encounter with Christ, that we should not be afraid to proclaim the outrageous claims about Christ and the cosmos that our faith entails, and that all successful evangelization must be rooted in the primordial proclamation that the Crucified lives, and all creation is ordered to Him. The histrionics about our supposedly endangered religious liberty was, to Lorenzo, even worse, a reduction of the faith not only to morals but to legalisms. I recall commiserating with Lorenzo after a bishop we both knew used his installation homily to defend the First Amendment. I said to Lorenzo on the phone, "He did not preach Christ and Him crucified. He preached James Madison and him justified." Lorenzo howled in laughter. Lorenzo rightly disdained any efforts to make the faith conform to worldly categories. That was one leg of his evangelistic genius.

The other leg, indeed the antidote to the reduction of faith to worldly categories, was accompaniment, an immersion in the world as a disciple. Lorenzo was a great pastor of souls because he was never shocked by anything we did humans did, he almost took delight in our foibles, seeing them as potential sources of conversion and grace. He dismissed nothing authentically human. Let me give an example. Like George W. Bush, when I was young and irresponsible, I was young and irresponsible. I remember attending Mardi Gras in New Orleans one year. Better to say, I remember some parts of attending Mardi Gras. Much of it remains a blur. But, I remember that one morning, having not made it back to my hotel all night, I went to a park by the side of the great river, and phoned Lorenzo. I told him, "Well, my fear of over-commitment did not come up." He howled. He did not reproach. He knew that God was active in my life, even when I chose to ignore it. Time and grace would suffice.

In his book *God at the Ritz* Lorenzo wrote these words:

In our relationship with the one who suffers, we as co-sufferers can impose nothing on the other person. We can only help the other to ask the question "why?" by asking it together – that is, by praying together. Praying together with the one who suffers is the just response to the suffering.

The cruelest response to suffering is the attempt to explain it away, to tell the one who suffers: "This is why this is happening. I'm sorry that you can't see the answer, but it's clear to me." When the apostles saw a man born blind, for example, they asked Jesus whether it was due to his sins or his parents' sins. Jesus rejected this explanation: he does not suffer because of his sins or his parents' sins; he suffers to manifest God's glory.

To look for an answer in the past is to reduce suffering to a functional mentality. The functional mentality explains everything in terms of past causes. This does not do justice to the one who suffers. I call this the "secularization" of suffering, the elimination of its link with transcendence. For Job's so-called friends, Job's suffering was an occasion to construct their theology rather than an opportunity to express their love. They would not walk with him, co-suffer with him, pray with him for grace. Instead, they fit Job's suffering into a theological system that explained everything away.

It goes without saying that Lorenzo was never offered a fellowship from the Ethics and Public Policy Center. He recognized in them the work of Job's friends and had no use for the neo-puritanism of the Catholic Right. But, in these words, I think we can discern one of the reasons he was so fascinated by, and devoted to, the man who

would say the Church must be a field hospital: Pope Francis. One of Lorenzo's favorite quotes from Emmanuel Mounier could well serve as a motto for this pontificate: "It is necessary to suffer so that the truth not be crystallized in doctrine, but be born from the flesh." Lorenzo loved Pope Francis. Ever since his election, whenever we would speak on the phone and the conversation would turn to the new pontificate, Lorenzo would say, "Isn't it amazing!" It was his highest compliment.

Lorenzo, again like Pope Francis, also had no use for the attempts of the Catholic Left to make Christianity intellectually respectable. How horrified he would have been had he lived to see the publication of Daniel Maquire's latest tome, entitled *Christianity without God: Moving beyond the Dogmas and Retrieving the Epic Moral Narrative*. God save us from the moralism of the left as much as from the moralism of the right! In his own book, Lorenzo addressed the dogmatic claim at the heart of our faith, and what he wrote there seems especially important for us here tonight. He wrote:

A woman once asked me if "resurrection of the body" was a metaphor. That explanation satisfies many people. As a result, Easter doesn't embarrass them. Understanding the resurrection of the body as a metaphor seems a civilized, moderate, reasonable position that heads off some unseemly conflicts with Christians holding other interpretations. One can, as it were, say "Oh, yes, I believe in the resurrection of the body," without revealing exactly what kind of resurrection one is speaking about.

What interests me here is this woman's question "is the 'resurrection of the body' a metaphor?" and the suggestion that, as a metaphor, that resurrection somehow corresponds to our experience of what is possible. My immediate reaction to the question was to think about "and to notice and feel" my own body, which could be diplomatically said to have reached threatening dimensions. I remembered how, when I try to get up in the morning, I discover parts of my body (because they hurt) that I didn't even know were there. So in response to this question about resurrection-of-the-body as metaphor, I replied, "My experience of the body is not the experience of a metaphor. The day this body becomes a metaphor, I'll be better equipped to answer your question."

This wasn't exactly St. Paul's argument for the possibility of a bodily resurrection, but my questioner understood what I meant. (I could tell because she laughed uncontrollably.) I mean, this was in southern California, where you see many bodies that make you think of the resurrection as a worthwhile thing, as a metaphor for their beauty and attraction. But, alas, farther away from Hollywood, this is not always the case. What I would like it to mean, what my heart wants, is the real possibility of having a body like those who at that very moment could be seen around the pool during the shooting of an episode of some television series. I have no idea what my risen body might be like, but if such a thing does exist, I want it to be closer to the bodies at the pool than to a metaphor.

Everything I loved most about Lorenzo is in that quote. The quality he shared with Flannery O'Connor, of turning an urbane "explanation" of the faith on its head. The ability to point out why our belief actually corresponds to our experience. The self-deprecating humor that permitted him to poke fun at the rest of us. I do not know if Lorenzo is now in heaven with a body like Channing Tatum's. I do know that his ability to speak and write in a way that passage epitomizes brought me, and so many others, closer to a deeper encounter with the Master.

Most of all, Lorenzo had an ability to tell a story, or make a conversation, in which he repeated a phrase from Scripture so that the person listening could hear that phrase as if it had just been spoken for the first time. In thinking about what to say tonight, and of what he would want to say to us, I was looking at his videos and in his book for an example of this ability to tell a story in which the words of Scripture are cast in a new light. For this is what real faith requires and evidences, the ability to encounter the Master in word and sacrament and in our daily experience as new, fresh, revolutionary, making demands but also promising the Lord's abiding grace.

I came across countless examples but then, one day when I was walking my St. Bernard Ambrose, I could hear Lorenzo's voice in my head, employing a phrase from Scripture that seemed appropriate for this evening, and which exemplified this ability he had to make the words of Scripture come alive as words freshly spoken. I could hear him say, "Look at you all, sitting around with your memories, trolling around for what? For wisdom? For consolation? Why do you seek the living amongst the dead???"

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