MICHAEL NOVAK'S REMARKABLE LIFE JOURNEY

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Michael Novak, *Writing from Left to Right: My Journey from Liberal to Conservative* (New York: Image, 2013)

"It is not those who cry, 'the poor, the poor' who will enter the Kingdom, but those who truly help the poor."

More than 20 years ago, that paraphrase of Scripture from the distinguished theologian, philosopher and political and social commentator Michael Novak resonated with me as I covered a talk by Mr. Novak at our diocesan seminary. For he was articulating the thinking of many of us who, while taking to heart our Church's admonition to give special priority (a "preferential option") to the needs of the poor, have found conventional approaches to that priority at least somewhat wanting. He was saying that good intentions are not enough, and that although the welfare state may *seem* the most compassionate approach, if it is not working, it is not Christian to perpetuate it simply for appearance's sake.

Most importantly, what he was affirming was not, primarily, particular *conclusions*; but rather the importance of the *search*, of *opening our minds* to new ideas, new approaches, new insights in service to the common good.

In *Writing from Left to Right* Michael Novak chronicles a life lived doing exactly that, in the process offering us a road map on how to arrive at our own best prudential judgments as how to best apply the principles of Catholic social teaching to the critical issues of our time.

This work is a treasure on several levels: first, as a remarkable inside historical account of so many epochal events

of the latter half of the twentieth century – in our Church, in our nation, in the international community – from someone who was not only in the center of it all, but who exerted a profound influence on emerging social, political, cultural and religious thought, and in policy approaches in areas ranging from economics, to foreign policy and human rights, to cultural issues.

On a second level, Novak offers his specific insights in many of these areas, even as his own views at times shifted – for example, from support of the Vietnam war to opposition, and then somewhat back again in retrospect; from support for the welfare state approach to combating poverty, to an embrace of free-market capitalism and job-stimulating tax cuts; and ultimately, away from purely economic responses to poverty, to a realization of the cultural factors that must also be addressed; and, as a result, from years of activism in national Democratic Party politics – at the service of such luminaries as Robert Kennedy, George McGovern and Sargent Shriver – to involvement in the emerging neoconservative movement and active service, in various capacities, in the Reagan Administration.

But it is on the third level – Novak's description of his own detailed, open-minded but principled *search* for the best solutions to the issues of human suffering he has sought to address – that this work is of greatest value; because, as he laments near the book's conclusion, he sees less and less inclination today – on all sides of our nation's great partisan divide – toward the kind of sincere, respectful dialogue, mutual charity and openness to new ideas that can best advance the common good.

Novak shares with us how his Slovak roots implanted in him an early and lifelong commitment to human rights and opposition to the Communist philosophy under which his family members were then being oppressed; and also how those eastern European roots would later give him a special kinship with "the Pope

who called me friend," John Paul II. He explains how his upbringing in the Pennsylvania mining town of Johnstown gave him early exposure to, and sensitivity toward, economic deprivation; yet at the same time how his father taught him never to "envy the rich," and how he came to understand, and sees today, that class envy, far from being a solution to poverty, can actually perpetuate it, while also engendering damaging conflicts within and between nations.

He recounts how after some 12 years of seminary training, he found himself in 1960 drawn instead to lay vocation, and to "the war of political ideas." Subsequent studies in philosophy led him to the "Christian Realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr, which would reinforce his natural inclination toward trying to explore all sides of an issue.

"I was born with a conservative temperament," he writes, "but I tried hard to inspect opposing arguments closely." He would take as his own guide—and today urges on all of us—Niebuhr's admonition that "In my own views there is always some error; and in the views of those I disagree with there is always some truth."

Travel to Rome in 1963 to report on the Second Vatican Council furthered his belief in the importance of such humble introspection – within institutions as well as individual minds.

"If the most time-encrusted and hidebound institution in the world was examining its conscience, instituting reforms, and taking in large gulps of fresh air," he writes, "well, then, any institution in the world could do so. And *should* – that seemed to be the subtext."

Novak describes how his growing opposition to the Vietnam war, while teaching at Stanford in the late 1960s, pushed him into a philosophical "left turn"– moderately at first, then more sharply after an erstwhile hero, then-Vice President Hubert

Humphrey, delivered a “glib, insensitive” speech at Stanford defending the war. True to form, however, Novak did not stop his own examination and re-examination of his positions, traveling to Vietnam to experience first hand the war he was writing and speaking against, and concluding at war’s end that he had allowed himself to be somewhat deceived about the true nature of the conflict – that far from being simply a homegrown revolution by the Viet Cong, it had in fact been a war of outside Communist aggression from the north.

While Novak marks “The publication of *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* in 1972″ as his “declaration of independence from the cultural left,” that was not his intention. He was hoping to be seen as offering a needed corrective to what he saw as “the unworthy prejudices of the cultural left” against “family people, traditional values and ethnic neighborhoods.”

“I was still writing as a man of the anti-capitalist left,” he observes, “but I was, in truth, departing from left-wing orthodoxy by singling out cultural issues (rather than economic issues) as the primary neuralgic point in American life.” He discovered that this departure from liberal orthodoxy offended the cultural left, “at that time the preeminent force watching over what couldn’t be said in American culture and what could.” He experienced for the first time “the fury of the Left when it marks someone as beyond the pale of acceptability,” and found himself so banished – as many Catholics likewise have found ourselves ostracized by the Catholic left, the self-appointed gatekeepers of Catholic social teaching, if we dare to posit applications of that teaching that stray from their liberal political orthodoxy.

Novak would subsequently find a home with the American Enterprise Institute, where he would join a growing number of similarly disaffected Democrats determined to explore alternative approaches to accomplishing social justice goals; and he found himself from its outset called to serve the

Reagan Administration in its global human rights efforts and domestic economic initiatives.

“Four main inquiries drove me in the 1980s,” he recounts:

“1) how to rethink capitalism in a moral and religious language,” an effort that would afford him influence not just in national and international political circles (Margaret Thatcher said of his book, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, “You are doing the most important work in the world”), but also in the Church, where his insights were welcomed by Pope John Paul II;

“2) what are the root concepts of human rights and how are they best protected?” – “by strong associations in free societies” was his answer, which he worked to advance as Ronald Reagan’s ambassador to the UN Commission on Human Rights;

“3) how to … defeat communism in the Soviet Union and China,” which he worked to do on the board of Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe; and

“4) how to break the chains of poverty throughout the world,” which inquiry he terms “my personal favorite,” reinforcing his lifelong commitment to this moral imperative that he knew must transcend partisan politics.

He documents the great strides that have been made worldwide in this effort – “over the last 30 years we have reduced the number of poor in the world by over 1 billion persons”– and observes that the “two propositions” tested over the last, “bloodiest century” have been disproven: that “dictatorship is better for the people than democracy,” and “socialism is better for the people than capitalism.” The opposite, he says, has been proven true: “democracy is better, and capitalism is better.”

Yet amid such progress, he worries about the destructive

effects of growing appeals to class envy, and about the cultural factors exacerbating economic deprivation. “Poverty in America (is) no longer characterized solely by low income but also by self-damaging behaviors” which must also be addressed.

Novak warns of a coming “demographic tsunami” brought on by a “de-population” crisis. Low birthrates, and “54 million abortions in the United States since 1973,” he writes, have blasted “a gaping hole” in projected funding for Social Security and Medicare, and threaten shrinking future generations with insurmountable national debt. And he worries that the re-definition of marriage is undermining the state’s ability to preserve an institution essential to “bearing children and nurturing them” in the “civic virtues and skills” essential to an ordered, prosperous society. He also laments the trend toward forcing “the traditional religious heritage of the nation’s institutions and morals … out of the public square” in favor of a secularism that is “not neutral” but “totalitarian” in its ideology.

Of perhaps greatest concern to Novak however, is what he sees as the growing hostility to the kind of “honest argument” that has been his life’s work, and that he knows is essential to building community and working together to develop the most effective responses to the critical issues of our time.

“I am more discouraged in 2013 than I have ever been over the determination of so many to refuse to talk with those with whom they disagree,” he writes.

He is not calling on us to compromise our principles. Rather, he is urging an openness in exploring the most effective ways to implement those principles – for Catholics, the principles of our Church’s social teaching – in service to the common good.

Michael Novak’s life story, chronicled so compellingly in this

work, shows us how to do that.

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