

# THE PERILS OF SENTIMENTALISM

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To be sentimental about certain things in life is not only normal, it is admirable. But sentimentalism is different. One of the definitions found in The Free Dictionary defines it as “excessive indulgence in sentiment or emotionalism, predominance of feeling over reason and intellect.” That is not admirable. Indeed, it can be perilous.

This is part of the Catholic problem. We want to be empathic and understanding, and that is all fine and good. But too many of us, and this certainly includes more than a few nuns, brothers, priests, bishops, and cardinals, overdo it and slide into sentimentalism.

This explains why some Catholics reacted badly to the Covington Catholic students. Unlike the bigots who taunted the students, these kids did not behave badly, yet they were quickly branded as racists. In particular, the sight of seeing a white Catholic male stare down an elderly drum-beating Indian brought out the worst in the student’s critics. They succumbed to sentimentalism.

Knee-jerk responses by onlookers to confrontations between whites and minorities are never good. White racists will always blame the minorities. They should be condemned. But we should also condemn those who exercise “excessive indulgence in sentiment or emotionalism” by rushing to defend the minorities. That is what happened in the Covington case.

Feelings that trump reason and intellect are as dangerous as racist outbursts. Even when it turned out that the “elderly” (not quite a senior citizen) Indian was the guilty party—the next day he led a crowd to storm the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception during Mass—some critics of the student were still unmoved.

The good news is that the Bishop of Covington reversed course and apologized. His problem was never racism; it was sentimentalism.

Sentimentalism also played a role in allowing some critics of the Virginia governor to complain about his blackface stunt. They were upset because this was seen as a stab at blacks. Yet when they learned of Gov. Ralph Northam's support for infanticide, they were unmoved. This is the way they think. It is more offensive to mock blacks than it is to allow innocent kids to die.

When President Barack Obama was scheduled to speak at the University of Notre Dame commencement exercise in 2009, and receive an honorary degree, I appeared on TV with a prominent priest who defended this decision. I had no problem with Obama speaking there—he was the president of the United States—but I objected to his receiving the honorary degree.

I told the priest that both of us would object to an anti-Semite receiving an award from a Catholic university. But when the person being honored is a rabid champion of abortion, only I object. He did not disagree.

Obama's mother was white but his father was black, and that is all it took for sentimentalism to kick in. This explains, at least in part, why the priest supported the decision to honor him. That abortion was not seen as evil as racism was as disturbing as it was predictable.

When I gave a talk to Ph.D. students at Carnegie Mellon University in the early 1990s, I unsettled the students. They noted the tenor of my pro-American remarks, and one of them—they were all white male engineering students—called me out saying I should not be so patriotic given America's historic treatment of blacks.

The student went on to say that all white people were guilty of discriminating against blacks. I asked if that included

him. He nervously said yes. I stunned the class when I responded that he should be arrested. Discrimination, I said, was against the law.

I continued by saying that I did not have to be arrested—I never discriminated against anyone. Indeed, I told the class that I had taught young black kids how to read and write when I taught in Spanish Harlem. They were speechless.

Sentimentalism clouded their thinking. These otherwise bright men allowed their feelings about racial injustice to conquer their intellect, permitting “excessive indulgence in sentiment and emotion.”

The religious and the clergy are especially vulnerable to sentimentalism. They are wired to helping the needy, many of whom are black and brown, and this explains their heroic efforts. But when they maximize their charitable impulses they risk losing sight of reality. And the reality is that no one is served by patronizing them. At that point, we are not treating minorities as equals.

There are good and bad people in all socio-economic classes. The same is true among people of all ethnic, racial, and religious groups. Stereotyping is not just about making unwarranted negative judgments about a whole category of people; it comes into play when we make unwarranted assumptions of a positive kind as well. Just as it is wrong to cast all people of color in negative terms, it is equally wrong to cast them in positive terms. Ditto for whites.

God gave us a heart and a head. We need to strike the right balance.