

## The nature of human error

Richard McBrien | Mar. 30, 2009 Essays in Theology

Everyone is familiar with the expression, "To err is human; to forgive is divine." People make mistakes all the time.

Some errors, however, are products of simple carelessness. They cannot be excused on the basis of human frailty alone. There is an element of personal responsibility that has to be addressed and remedied.

A recent op-ed piece in *The Wall Street Journal*, "[Why the John Paul Generation Will Welcome New York's Next Archbishop](#) [1]" (3/5/09), offers a case in point.

The column opens with a reference to Archbishop Timothy Dolan's visit to St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, N.Y., as a dramatic expression of his commitment to increasing the number of vocations to the priesthood.

The *Journal* writer acknowledges what is evident to anyone who takes a look, namely, that "Vocations are way down." But then he adds: "To make matters worse, influential dissenters within the church are heavily invested in the archbishop's failure."

Who are these Catholic Rush Limbaughs? The writer provides no names. President Richard Nixon used to refer to the "some who say" crowd, but without ever identifying any of them. They served instead as rhetorical foils whose only function was to sharpen the point that the President wanted to make.

I, for one, do not know of a single "dissenter" (again, unnamed and undefined) who is "heavily invested in the [next] archbishop's failure." And I, for one, hope just the opposite happens, namely, that Archbishop Dolan has an extraordinarily successful tenure as the pastoral leader of the most prominent archdiocese in all of the United States.

The *Journal* column identifies me as having been quoted twice in *The New York Times* as "criticizing church efforts to revive the sacramental confession of sins."

But here again carelessness, not simple human frailty, is at work. The *Times* articles in which I was quoted were not about "church efforts" in general, but about specific initiatives undertaken in one instance by the bishop of Brooklyn to grant a plenary indulgence to Catholics during this Year of Paul, and in another by a pastor in Stamford, Conn., to revive the pre-Vatican II practice of auricular confession in the old-fashioned confessional stalls.

My criticism was not of an effort to "revive the sacramental confession of sins," but to revive a particular form of the sacrament -- a form that sets aside the new venue for celebrating the sacrament in a reconciliation room, in a face-to-face encounter with the priest-confessor, in favor of a return to the anonymous transaction between penitent and priest in a darkened confessional.

The *Journal* column notes that Archbishop Dolan had spent seven years as rector of the North American

College in Rome. Indeed, it was there, in Rome, that I first met him. I came away from that initial encounter with a very positive impression of him as a warm and friendly person with a gift for hospitality and a robust sense of humor. Why would any Catholic, "dissenter" or not, want him to fail in New York?

Furthermore, what does the "viability of a celibate male priesthood" have to do with restoring the "teaching authority (magisterium) of the pope, [providing] doctrinal clarity and unity, and [putting] an end to the deviations and diversions that sprang up in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council?"

The Catholic church had a married clergy for more than half of its history, without compromise of its teaching authority or doctrinal clarity and unity, and there are today thousands of married Catholic priests in the so-called Eastern-rite churches -- again without the dire consequences attributed in the *Journal* column to a married clergy.

And what specifically are the "deviations and diversions" that sprang up after Vatican II? Is the "writer in Ridgefield, Conn." perhaps referring to the only schism to divide the post-conciliar church -- a schism on the right, not the left, led by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, whose four bishops recently had their excommunications lifted by Pope Benedict XVI?

The author of the *Journal* piece observes that the previous and current popes had been "scrupulous in appointing bishops with orthodox views." Does he mean to imply that the popes before John Paul II -- Paul VI, John XXIII, and Pius XII, for example -- did not appoint "orthodox" bishops?

The writer also celebrates the "apparent orthodoxy of the young priests who are being ordained these days." At least he qualifies the noun this time with the adjective "apparent," but the same question applies: were the bishops of past years ordaining unorthodox priests?

In the end, are we dealing here with errors that are attributable to simple human frailty, or errors born of carelessness, for which a writer must bear some personal responsibility?

© 2009 Richard P. McBrien. All rights reserved. Fr. McBrien is the Crowley-O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 01/25/2015 - 12:03):** <http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/nature-human-error>

**Links:**

[1] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123630999632948969.html>