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Broken vows: John Edwards and Fr. Cutie

Mary Ann Walsh | May. 15, 2009

The much media-hyped sagas of Father Alberto Cutie, the Miami priest who has come clean about a sexual relationship with a woman, and John Edwards, whose infidelity is being disclosed by his wife Elizabeth on her *Resilience* book tour, have something in common.

Both tell the tales of infidelity. Similarities might seem to end there. But they don't.

Mrs. Edwards' book emphasizes the effects of a fractured relationship on a spouse. She said it changed her. Public sympathy has generally sided with the wronged wife who is battling cancer and who lost a teenage son in an auto accident.

Father Cutie's story finds sympathy, on the other hand, with the man who "done her wrong," rather than the actual one(s) wronged -- the people in the church.

Neither man's story is just a personal one. Even without their notoriety, both are sad tales that affect us all. For, to paraphrase the metaphysical poet John Donne's poem "No Man Is an Island," "Everyone's infidelity diminishes me."

Most women shudder inside when they hear about infidelity in the marriage of someone they know. The obvious fear: If it happened to her, it could happen to me. It's a soul-stirring realization that makes a woman secretly question if anyone can be trusted, and makes her wonder if she'll be the last to know.

Father Cutie's plight, however, finds different reactions. The Hollywood handsome star, who has become a one-man publishing and advice-dispensing industry, has become, for better or worse, the poster boy for the latest salvo aimed at the Catholic Church.

Cutie declared on CBS' Early Show that "I don't want to be the anti-celibacy priest. I think that's unfortunate. I think it's a debate that's going on in our society, and now I've become kind of a poster boy for it."

Alas, he may not want to be the poster boy, but he seems to have forsaken the first rule in tamping this down: Stay off the air.

The media love a sex or hypocrisy story, and when both converge in the tale of the unfaithful padre, the media know no bounds. Celibacy becomes a joke, rather than something to be respected; an impossibility, despite millions -- likely more -- who have lived celibate lives for centuries.

Yet whatever you think about celibacy, the real story here is infidelity, not being true to a sacred vow. This fracture of fidelity has an impact on more than the pair involved.

Fractured fidelity undermines not just a couple, but their wider community. John Edwards did not just hurt his wife, but also his family, friends and people who admired him. It cast a shadow over his work for the poor, even

though those efforts are much praised by his wife in her book and media jaunt.

Father Cutie has hurt people too, including the crowds surrounding the parish he led so well. They're holding up well as they mill about with media outside the church. Yet one wonders about the couples he prepared for their lifetime commitment in marriage, the children he taught to never tell a lie, the ailing parishioners he assured of their place in heaven.

The effect of infidelity is profound. Elizabeth Edwards says it well in her book when she writes, "I am a different person now. I was not wounded, not afraid, not uncertain before and now I always will be."

One wishes the Edwardses and Father Cutie well in the wake of their foibles and failings. There's nothing for political or church enemies to laugh at here. Only something to regret -- the acute pain that John, Elizabeth and Father Alberto experience in their own lives, and the dull, long-lasting pain evoked in the communities around them.

No one is an island. Fractured fidelity pains us all.

[Sister Mary Ann Walsh is director of media relations at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. This was written for Religion News Service.]

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