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Incivility hurts the pro-life cause

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 11, 2009 All Things Catholic

One bit of gallows humor in Catholic circles is that sometimes the worst enemies of the pro-life movement are pro-lifers themselves. The point is that a handful of activists occasionally come off as so shrill, so angry and judgmental, that fair-minded people simply tune out the pro-life message.

That?s horribly unfair, of course, to the vast majority of people involved in pro-life efforts, who in my experience are respectful, idealistic, and eminently rational. There?s just enough truth to the perception, however, to make it worth a brief examination of conscience.

Cases in point are offered by the health care reform debate and the Kennedy funeral, both of which have occasioned some truly nasty commentary ? much of it, naturally, in the blogosphere. Two Catholic personalities in particular have found themselves in the line of fire: Daughters of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association; and Basilian Fr. Tom Rosica, head of Salt and Light TV, a national Catholic network in Canada.

Both, I should acknowledge, are friends, and it pains me to see both facing unwarranted personal attacks. For that reason, I?m permitting myself to set aside my normal journalistic detachment in order to make a point.

I came to know Keehan when she began leading annual trips to Rome for board members of the various Catholic hospital networks in America, the purpose of which is to foster great understanding and a deeper sense of common cause between the Vatican and leaders of Catholic health care in the United States. (In the interests of full disclosure, I?m usually part of the program for these visits.) Sr. Carol enjoys obvious trust in official circles; when Benedict XVI came to America, she was part of the medical team travelling with the pope. Over the years she?s emerged as an important spokesperson for Catholic health care, including the church?s unambiguously pro-life position.

My friendship with Rosica dates to 2002, when he was the chief organizer of Pope John Paul II?s visit to Canada for World Youth Day. Since then, we?ve bumped into one another in a variety of settings. He?s perhaps the most truly ?catholic? guy I?ve ever met, not only in the sense of speaking multiple languages and being a man of the world, but someone obviously in love with the whole depth and breadth of the Catholic tradition. He?s also a talented entrepreneur, as his performance with World Youth Day and his success in building a TV network from the ground up illustrate.

Both CHA under Keehan, and Salt and Light under Rosica, have positioned themselves firmly in the Catholic middle. They?re faithful to the doctrine and discipline of the church, but also ?non-partisan? in the sense of being open to a variety of temperaments, outlooks, and experiences.

For their trouble, both now find themselves under siege.

In Keehan?s case, the blast came from a blog operated by the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese. In an August 6 posting, writer Jack Smith accused Keehan of ?being at odds with the USCCB and the pro-life cause? on health care reform. (A USCCB spokesperson promptly denied that assertion.) Smith pointed to Keehan?s annual salary of $856,093 ? which, as he noted, is turned over to her order ? to suggest that she?s essentially a highly paid shill for the health care industry. The post has metastasized on the Internet.

With Rosica, the drumbeat stems from a pro-life website called ?LifeSiteNews,? which prior to the Kennedy funeral invited readers to send protests to Cardinal Sean O?Malley in Boston. Some pro-life activists wanted Salt and Light to make a similar appeal to its viewers, which Rosica declined to do. He argued that it?s not the role of his network to put pressure on the bishops, and in any event, Salt and Light isn?t even an American operation.

When Rosica wrote a commentary appealing for calm, LifeSite posted an article setting him in opposition to Raymond Arroyo, a news commentator for EWTN who was openly critical of the funeral. (For the record, Rosica says that Salt and Light actually has good relations with EWTN.) That piece, according to Rosica, generated more than 500 hostile messages from people whipped up by the ?LifeSite? coverage ? some so ugly and threatening that they couldn?t be published for fear of triggering legal repercussions.

Of course, there?s plenty of room for legitimate discussion about judgments calls Keehan and Rosica have made. Maybe CHA should indeed push harder about abortion in the health care debate; maybe Salt and Light should have given more space to critics of the Kennedy funeral. In principle, there?s also nothing wrong with asking where a group that takes positions on public policy gets its money, and how that funding might influence its judgments.

I?m certain both Keehan and Rosica would be the first to acknowledge that raising such questions is entirely fair. There?s a world of difference, however, between respectful disagreement and character assassination, and some of what we?ve seen in recent days doesn?t just cross that line but obliterates it.

There?s much more I could say, but I?ll restrict myself to this: If Sr. Carol Keehan or Fr. Tom Rosica are your idea of enemies of the faith, it?s time for a reality check.

Moving forward, it?s important that influential Catholic leaders, particularly those with the greatest credibility in pro-life circles, find ways to call off the rhetorical fireworks. They don?t help the pro-life cause, and good people end up as collateral damage.

Abraham Lincoln once said, ?I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends.? Pro-life activists, like everyone else, ought to remember that this principle also works in reverse.

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I spent most of this week in São Paulo, Brazil, giving a couple of talks at a conference on church communications. It was organized by the International Institute for Social Sciences, which is an Opus Dei-affiliated institution.

Brazil is, of course, the largest Catholic country in the world, and it?s an important point of reference for the life of the church all across Latin America. (Among other things, the current president of CELAM, the council of Latin American bishops, is Brazilian Archbishop Raimundo Damasceno of Aparecida.)

In many ways, Damasceno had the best line of the week. Apropos of communications strategy, he said: ?It?s not enough for us to speak in the name of the Lord. We also have to act like the Lord.?

His point was that making pronouncements will rarely be persuasive if they aren?t backed by the credible witness of Christian life, down to the nitty-gritty details of how church officials and ordinary Catholics alike treat the people in their lives.

I posted a few blog entries on my experiences in Brazil, which can be found on the NCR Today blog [1].

One footnote: The two Americans scheduled to speak at this conference were myself and Ari Goldman, a former New York Times correspondent (and author of the terrific book The Search for God at Harvard) who now teaches at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. As it happens, I was forced to apologize for our stupidity, because neither Goldman nor I realized that we had to request visas to get into Brazil. At the last minute, therefore, both of us faced the prospect of not being able to make the trip.

In the end, I made it but Goldman didn?t. Conference organizers were able to get both of us special permission to enter Brazil without a visa, but that didn?t solve the problem of boarding our flights. Air carriers can be charged heavy fines if they allow people to board international flights without a visa, so they tend not to be moved by someone who swears to have permission but who doesn?t actually have the paperwork.

Goldman was turned away for his flight in New York, but I managed to persuade the good people at Delta Airlines in Atlanta to let me go ahead. Truth to be told, I flashed my letter of invitation to conference, which was in Portuguese, and described it as a ?special entry permit.? Moreover, I made sure to do so after the regular boarding process had already begun, so that the desk agent didn?t have too much time to think about it. That strategy, admittedly a little slippery but in service of a good cause, did the trick.

A few Italians friends of mine were also in São Paulo this week, and they immediately told me that my years in Italy have served me well ? I?ve developed an instinct, they said, for finding a way around seemingly rigid rules and structures, something the Italians long ago turned into a fine art.

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