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The 'anti-Catholic!' cry is a cheap, easy accusation

Tom Roberts | Nov. 9, 2009 NCR Today

It is unfortunate that Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, new to the national stage and responsible for one of the most visible and potentially most influential sees in the nation, chose to play the tired anti-Catholic card so early in his tenure. His recent blog posting [1] accused The New York Times and the wider culture of indulging in rampant anti-Catholic activity.

In doing so, he wastes the authority of his office by aligning it with such imprudent screamers as William Donohue and his Catholic League, which exists to raise money so it can continue to scream Fire! in the crowded theater of overcharged religionists.

The reality is, of course, that it is increasingly difficult to establish an anti-Catholic case of any substance or depth in the culture when so much -- industry, politics, finance, academia, the Supreme Court itself -- is in the hands of high-profile Catholics.

One can understand the frustration of Dolan and others as church leaders attempt to regain some of the significant ground they've lost in prestige and credibility thanks to their conduct throughout the sex abuse crisis, financial scandals and complicity with such hierarchical nonsense as the recent investigation of religious women.

The anti-Catholic narrative is a canard, however, another attempt to deflect attention away from what most of us in the pews and beyond know is long overdue: a deep, introspective and honest look at the culture of hierarchy and whether it begins to reflect today the mandates of the Gospel of the Suffering Servant.

The cry "anti-Catholic!" has become a cheap and easy accusation. No one can hold a bishop to account for the charge. No adjudicating body exists to measure the evidence. We're all left to measure it on our own, and I daresay most find the charge a pathetic attempt to deflect blame elsewhere.

I have known Laurie Goodstein, one of the targets of Dolan's ire, as a colleague in the world of religion reporting for at least two decades. Her work could constitute a journalism seminar on how to cover that world. I find her scrupulously fair, and she spends more time on the ground than most doing the hard work of reporting. She's been chosen for an award from the Academy of Religion for an earlier series, sensitively done and deeply reported, about foreign priests in the United States.

Several members of the hierarchy, most notably Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver and now Archbishop Dolan, have attempted to distract our attention away from the severity of the sex abuse crisis in the church by pointing the finger at others -- at teachers, Boy Scouts, the culture at large, the press -- but it is an ineffective strategy. There are several principal reasons the church continues to come under scrutiny for its handling of crises and scandals related to sex, and none of them has to do with the press or an anti-Catholic culture.

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- First, no organization or institution in the world moralizes as publicly or persistently as the Catholic

Church on matters of sex and sexuality. Its rules and sanctions are severe.

On the matter of homosexuality, the church claims to know the mind and intent of God so intimately and perfectly that its officials confidently pronounce that a whole category of humans who have a homosexual orientation are intrinsically disordered and are forever condemned to a life of sexual abstinence in order to remain within the community.

An entire continent can face devastation from the AIDS epidemic, but the church refuses to budge on its absolute opposition to the use of condoms. It doesn't matter that even some bishops risk the wrath of Rome to beg that compassion be inserted into the equation. It doesn't matter that some women essentially face a death sentence in having sexual relations with their husbands. No breach of the rules can be tolerated.

It is once and done for divorced Catholics. No mistakes can be tolerated. It's either perfection or don't remarry, and if you do, stay away from the Eucharistic table.

The love of married couples is considered illicit, unworthy of the church's approval unless every sexual act is open to procreation. Love is relegated to biological machinery, the prime principle of responsible parenthood is a breeding function.

The church is a severe taskmaster when it comes to human sexuality. Any organization so absolute in its rules and so unforgiving in its sanctions naturally invites scrutiny of its own conduct, particularly that of its ministers and teachers.

- Second, no organization on earth -- not other denominations or faith groups, not the Boy Scouts or teachers or families -- has the equivalent capacity and culture of the Catholic Church for hiding and protecting sexual abusers.

In those instances where internal church documents have been released, it is clear that bishops, cardinals, abbots and provincials went to extraordinary lengths to deceive the Catholic community and civil authorities. (That's why the Bishop William Lori of the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., fought to the Supreme Court to keep documents sealed; it's why Cardinal Roger Mahony in Los Angeles has spent millions in legal machinations attempting to keep documents secret.)Those entrusted as overseers of the community kept in circulation repeat offenders with little regard for the community's children or for victims' families. Married people, homosexuals and divorced Catholics may live in a once-and-done world of sexual rules, but members of the privileged clergy culture could commit sexual crimes time and again and find limitless second chances and understanding among their peers.

- Finally, in dealing with the sexual abuse crisis, the bishops have trampled the church's fundamental teachings on what is required for seeking forgiveness and reconciliation within the community.

When it comes to laity, there's little tolerance for general sentiments of sorrow or ceremonies of general forgiveness. The church demands specificity, the sin must be named in order to receive absolution, we are taught, and egregious public scandal requires a public accountability.

We've seen none of that. No bishop has yet given a detailed report of his complicity in the scandal. No bishop has detailed, without being forced by public pressure or civil authorities, his personal culpability in the scandal. We've seen some moving reconciliation services, where bishops generally apologized for what was done to victims by priests; we've seen priests tossed unceremoniously and with little or no due process, to the sidelines; we've heard endless apologies for the fact that children were abused. But there's been no full voluntary accounting for what the hierarchy did in the church's name to hide predators, buy silence and re-victimize victims in sometimes vicious legal proceedings.

The bishops betrayed the community's sacramental life, and no amount of pointing the finger at others will heal that breach.

Everyone wishes this horrible period would come to an end. The scandal causes an endless drain of energy and distorts the life of the community. The realization remains that the leadership of the community has acted in a way it would not tolerate in anyone else and remains above church and civil law. That's what's truly anti-Catholic about this period of the church's history.

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[1] http://www.archny.org/news-events/columns-and-blogs/blog---the-gospel-in-the-digital-age/index.cfm?i=14042