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A 'Dallas experiment' in orthodoxy and openness

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 5, 2010 All Things Catholic

In Georges Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*, the elderly Curé de Torcy gives his young priest friend a bit of advice about proclaiming the Gospel: "The Word of God is a red-hot iron," he says. "Truth is meant to save you first, and the comfort comes later."

One could probably craft a meditation on the state of the Catholic soul today in terms of the tension between those two values -- truth and comfort. We want the church to offer comfort, which among other things implies that Catholics shouldn't brutalize one another in internal tribal warfare. Yet we also want the church to be bold in proclaiming the truth that saves, which inevitably means that sometimes lines have to be drawn and feelings may be bruised.

The $64,000 question is, can we do both? Can the Catholic church be both the "sacrament of the unity of the human race" and a fearless evangelical force?

One place to watch these tensions play out is the University of Dallas, where I took part in a panel discussion Monday night devoted to "the identity of a Catholic university." The point of departure was Bishop Kevin Farrell's commencement address last May, in which he warned against "dogmatism, closed mindedness, judgmentalism, [and] suspicion of another's motives" in the life of a Catholic university.

Here's what makes the situation especially interesting.

A strong current in Catholic life these days is what I've called "evangelical Catholicism," meaning a drive for clarity and courage about Catholic identity. It's both top-down, the most important policy-setting instinct in Catholicism, and also bottom-up, especially palpable among a cohort of younger Catholics usually tagged the "John Paul II generation."

Dallas has just such an evangelical ethos. Given its recent history and the kind of person it tends to attract, the university is popularly regarded as a "conservative" alternative to Catholic institutions sometimes seen as more secular and liberal. (I chatted with one young man Monday night, for example, who told me there's a cluster of students at UD from California who came here because they didn't feel they could find a "serious" Catholic university back home.)

In other words, if you're looking for an experiment as to whether it's possible to be both unapologetically Catholic and yet civil in engaging disagreement, the University of Dallas represents a mighty interesting laboratory.

Moreover, the powers that be seem to understand that. Back in 2001, the staff of what was then called the "Institute for Religious and Pastoral Studies" defected to the new Ave Maria College, and then-Bishop Charles Grahmann called their exodus a "blessing." (The bishop of Dallas is also the chancellor of the university.)

Grahmann said the leaders of the institute had become "advocates of an ideal orthodoxy and built walls that no

one could penetrate." When the dust settled, the result was a new School of Ministry self-consciously designed to be more mainstream.

Farrell's commencement address last May forms part of the same picture.

"We need to be self-critical and realize that no one of us has the only approach to Catholicism," Farrell said. (His address was published in *Origins* in August). "Honest debate, not confrontation -- true dialogue where we seek to understand the other, not facile condemnation -- should be the overarching way we move forward."

"The word 'heretic' has been reserved for precious few people in our Catholic tradition," Farrell said, rejecting what he called "verbal fratricide" and a tendency to become "smug, dismissive and righteous" about the Catholic intellectual tradition.

"No theologian, or professor or pope, has ever had or ever will have all the answers to what it means to be authentically and fully Catholic," Farrell said.

Obviously, Farrell didn't craft these remarks in a vacuum. He challenged "verbal fratricide" because, at least in the eyes of some, that occasionally describes the climate at the University of Dallas. As one insider put it to me, the official motto is "The Catholic University for Independent Thinkers," but in practice it can feel like a university for people who think only one way about being Catholic.

To be sure, Farrell is no milquetoast on Catholic identity. Recall that he and Bishop Kevin Vann of Fort Worth issued a joint pastoral letter on Catholics and politics in October 2008, calling abortion "the defining moral issue, not just of today but of the last 35 years." It was widely seen as a warning to Catholics about supporting Obama (or, at least, doing so uncritically), and led to protests outside the chancery.

Yet Farrell's commencement address amounted to a plea to blend orthodoxy with openness, clarity with generosity of spirit. That's a beguiling vision, but just because somebody decrees it doesn't automatically make it so.

I spoke with a few students and faculty on Monday night who embody the evangelical outlook, and who told me they feel stigmatized by some elements in the university's leadership. They worry that what's precious to them about the university, meaning its robust Catholicity, may be at risk. Meanwhile, others told me they're weary of feeling that their orthodoxy is constantly under a microscope, and that someone always seems ready to question their Catholic credentials over any disagreement, however trivial.

In other words, things are still messy. Yet the reality is that there are precious few places where what we might call the "evangelicals" and the "moderates" in the Catholic world actually live cheek by jowl in significant numbers, and the tensions at UD are therefore also an index of possibility -- the possibility that the university could offer an object lesson in how truth and comfort, clarity and dialogue, can coexist.

Especially with a new university president taking over on March 1, the "Dallas experiment" bears watching.

* * *

As a footnote, I may have inadvertently added fuel to the fire by introducing something new to fight over: My phrase "Taliban Catholicism" to capture a certain trajectory within the church. (At least I think I coined the term, though for all I know somebody else got there first.)

In my brief remarks Monday night, I applauded Farrell's vision, underscoring it with a bit of rhetoric that's become part of my standard stump speech. A defining challenge for the church these days, I said, is to craft a

synthesis between entirely legitimate hunger for identity on the one hand, and engagement with the great social movements of the time on the other.

That synthesis, I said, has to involve striking a balance between two extremes. Here's how I described them:

"On the one extreme lies what my friend and colleague George Weigel correctly terms 'Catholicism Lite,' meaning a watered-down, sold-out form of secularized religiosity, Catholic in name only. On the other is what I call 'Taliban Catholicism,' meaning a distorted, angry form of the faith that knows only how to excoriate, condemn, and smash the TV sets of the modern world."

Some in the audience chuckled, but others weren't so amused. One younger faculty member rose during the Q&A period to offer a thoughtful, and heartfelt, challenge:

"To say things with clarity is not to be the Catholic Taliban," she said, adding that she found the phrase "profoundly offensive."

"There are no suicide bombers in the Catholic church," she said, "but we have had an epidemic of Catholicism Lite for the last 30 years." Younger Catholics, she insisted, should not be dismissed as fanatics simply because they seek "fidelity and clarity."

Her remarks were met with applause, suggesting she had struck a chord, though others later pulled me aside to say they found them strident. (By the way, it turns out the questioner is a relative of a friend of mine in Rome ... small world.)

For the record, she's not the first person who's objected to the term "Taliban Catholicism," just as others protested when Weigel first started talking about "Catholicism Lite." Of course, when pundits employ such sound-bites, part of the point is to provoke a reaction, so it would be disingenuous to proclaim shock that anyone could take offense.

That said, let me offer two clarifications that may help.

First, at least when I use them, the phrases "Catholicism Lite" and "Taliban Catholicism" are not intended to describe real people. Instead, I understand them as states of mind, instincts, and psychological tendencies -- potential distortions in Catholic life that can flare up anywhere if we're not careful.

To be honest, there's probably a little Catholic Lite and a little Taliban in all of us.

Second, I suspect many people assume that by "Catholicism Lite" I mean the Catholic left, and by "Taliban Catholicism" the church's conservatives. Not so.

In fact, there's a right-wing form of Catholicism Lite that's just as watered-down and sold out to secularism as its kissing cousin on the left. In the States, it can take the form of a country club Republican Catholicism -- untroubled by the inequities of global free-market capitalism, quite at home with anti-immigrant rhetoric, the death penalty, and the use of armed force.

At least in my mind, the defining feature of "Catholicism Lite" is not a liberal or conservative outlook, but rather taking one's cues from secular culture rather than the faith. No ideological camp has a monopoly on that.

Similarly, there's a Taliban instinct on the Catholic left that can be just as noxious as its right-wing version. It generally includes paranoia about almost any exercise of authority in the church, coupled with derision of any attempt to defend traditional Catholic thought, speech or practice -- a liberal "hermeneutic of suspicion" that can easily shade off into rage. Try telling a certain kind of Catholic liberal that Benedict XVI isn't actually "rolling

back the clock" on Vatican II, for example, and you'll want to duck and cover before the shooting starts.

Bottom line: When I talk about "Taliban Catholicism," I know I'm playing with fire -- but the point is to invite an examination of conscience across the board, myself very much included, not to slur one side or the other in Catholic debates.

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