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Good Conformity & Bad

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 9, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Father Jim Martin, SJ, has a thoughtful post [1]over at America?s ?In All Things? about the controversy surrounding a recent speech [2]by Bishop Kevin Dowling and its posting ob the web, removal from the web, and subsequent reposting here at NCR. Dowling is a hero and his talk should be read and pondered. His criticism is a criticism from the heart, and from a heart that clearly, passionately loves the Church he is criticizing.

Martin is correct that within the Church, the fear of appearing disloyal to the Pope has crippled the hierarchy and stifled many in the clergy and laity: Unwilling to offend, they are unwilling to criticize. In this high-tech age, any one who raises a criticism will be labeled a ?dissenter,? and the charge will be on the web and/or in Rome as fast as your modem will get it there. The phenomenon is not unique to the Church: I have seen it in politics and business also. In the classic children?s tale, it is the Emperor, not the Pope, who has no clothes. But, in a hierarchy, the leadership on this must come from the top. Pope Benedict must invite bishops to speak honestly and openly: He should start by inviting Bishop Dowling to Castel Gandolfo and issuing a press release to the effect that he was invited precisely because the Pope wishes to commend his openness. Bishops must empower their priests and their lay people to criticize candidly. It is rule 101 of effective governance: You must have people around you who are given permission to tell you what you do not want to hear.

My one objection to Father Martin?s essay is this: He writes about the ?pressure to conform? and, in this context, he is undoubtedly correct. There is an ecclesiological conformity that has succeeded in producing a Church that is boring, unable to evangelize, obsessed with nostalgia, not tradition, that no longer generates culture. But, as Pope Benedict XVI sees it, the principle difficulty of the modern age is that it is so obsessed with self-assertion and self-promotion and self-expression, that it sees all conformity as a bad thing. And, the Holy Father is not wrong in thinking that the primary task for himself and for all Catholics is to conform ourselves to Christ. How to fix the one, bad kind of conformity while encouraging the other necessary variety? In our American culture, where all manner of political, religious and cultural dissent is lionized, dissent per se is scarcely prophetic. The true prophetic voice in the Church today must not only raise Father Martin?s cry for honest discussion within the Church but Pope Benedict?s cry for a recommitment to conformity to Christ also. I know Father Martin, and know he agrees with the need to conform himself to Christ, so my charge is not personal. His life and his writings are a testimony to his loyalty to and love for the Church. My charge is only one of omission, but I think it is an important omission.

The Church has a desperate need for an internal conversation, but everything about the technological changes of the past century, combined with the ecclesiastical changes wrought by ultra-montanism, have made such a conversation impossible. Like it or not, the conversation will be had in the open and the Pope and the bishops have a responsibility to create the conditions in which the whole Church can initiate that conversation. Some people call for Vatican III. It has, in its way, already begun.

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[1] http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&entry_id=3098
[2] http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/catholic-social-teaching-finds-church-leadership-lacking