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The Vatican & The Media

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 12, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The Vatican is probably thinking that it doesn?t matter what it does, it can?t get a break from bad press coverage. There is something to this: As I have argued earlier [1], the coverage of Pope Benedict?s role in the sex abuse crisis, especially that in the New York Times, has been tendentious, with alarming lede paragraphs and subsequent quotes and documents that are markedly less conclusive and evidentiary than anything that would warrant such an inflammatory lede.

That said, the Vatican seems to be quite capable of shooting itself in the foot with no help from the Times. News reports [2]indicate that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is set to issue new guidelines for the handling of clergy sex abuse cases and that, those same guidelines will also deal with other matters, such as the canonical penalties visited upon those who attempt to ordain women. This is a trainwreck.

Let us set aside the issue of the ordination of women. Let us also set aside whether the new regulations, which apparently will apply to the universal church the guidelines adopted by the U.S. bishops in 2002, are sufficient. Let us only consider how this will play in the media. Instead of headlines like ?Pope Cracks Down on Sex Abuse? we are already seeing headlines that read, ?Ordaining Women = Raping Children.? Now, this latter headline is not exactly accurate. The CDF document will not equate ordaining women with raping children, although it will view both as a sin against the sacrament of orders. We do not denounce the U.S. Criminal Code because it creates sanctions against both insider trading and murder. That does not mean ?Insider Trading = Murder.?

But, the leadership of the Church should be alert enough to recognize that the sex abuse crisis must be faced on its own merits, and that not just the press, but the people in the pews, want more vigorous, and especially more accountable and transparent, procedures for dealing with the problem. Why introduce any other issue? Why muddy the waters? Again, if you think it is entirely appropriate for the Vatican to crack down on women?s ordination, and even if you believe that an attempt to ordain women is a flagrant an offense to the sacrament of orders as the abuse of children, you can see how badly this conflation of the two issues will play among a press corps that has never taken a course in sacramental theology.

This raises a more difficult question. Should the Vatican care what the press does? Do we want the Pope and the cardinals figuring out public relations? strategies? Whether they like it or not, the media is not only how the Church?s statements and decision will be communicated to the world, it is how they will be communicated to fellow Catholics. And, that is why the Vatican must take greater care with how its decisions will play in the media.

Regarding the sex abuse scandal, of course, more is needed than media savvy. In another context, I had occasion the other day to describe the action of grace using the metaphor of a good cognac. Our job as Christians is to be a fine glass for the cognac. We are not the cognac and we know we are not the ones who pour the cognac. Our job is to be a vessel for the cognac, and a good vessel has two tasks, to be clean and to be transparent. The people in the pews want to know that the princes of the Church are not taking bribes from men like Father Maciel and that there are procedures of accountability to ensure that such gross evil is never again covered up.

Yes, the Pope and the bishops must continue to voice their contrition for this horrible sin that has infected the Church, but they must do more than apologize. These new policies for the universal Church are precisely the kind of actions needed, yet the Vatican appears to be ready to present them in such a way as to diminish their significance.

There was a time when Vatican statements were issued in Latin, usually in the form of letters to members of the local hierarchy. The local bishops would translate the texts which, like all translations, permitted a bit of tailoring. The bishop might, if he thought it necessary, issue a pastoral letter in his own name to the clergy of his diocese, further tailoring the message to suit the pastoral needs of his flock. The priests, in their pulpits, would provide yet another layer of interpretation. The local bishops and clergy could provide context, emphasize the points that struck them, in their pastoral work, as most necessary. Today, that method of delivering papal instructions has been short-circuited and the modems at the news bureaus in Rome are faster than the pastoral processes of the Church. Newsmen and women are not charged with the care of souls, nor preserving the doctrine of the faith, so their interpretations of a given text will bear a different stamp: They seek controversy. The blogosphere ups the ante further.

There are times, and the sex abuse crisis is one such time, when the Vatican must act and act decisively. But how it acts will be interpreted by the media. That is a fact. ?Yet it moves,? said Galileo. The Vatican must become more adept at communicating its decisions if it wishes for those decisions to be effective, not because it can or should be involved in a public relations campaign, but to serve the papacy?s essential function of confirming the faithful. In the current crisis, anything that leads the faithful to further question the moral authority, indeed the moral integrity, of the hierarchy, is another wound to the Church.

The Master commanded the apostles to preach the Gospels unto the ends of the earth. Today, when that command is technologically possible as never before, there is no excuse for the Vatican, and the hierarchy more generally, not to do a better job of presenting its message, framing its decisions, and helping the faithful people in the pews to understand what it is doing and why.

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