NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

'Let's not let anyone think we're soft'

Joe Ferullo | Jul. 16, 2010 NCR Today

Someone must've been afraid of making Catholics happy. It's the only explanation that makes sense.

I imagine a meeting deep inside the Vatican, far beyond the reach of tourists and their modern world. A dozen aged bureaucrats of the Curia gather around an ornate oak table, lit by candles placed in wrought-iron fixtures overhead.

They are, just one more time, reviewing the new rules for disciplining priests who have sexually abused minors. It's not perfect, they all realize, but it is good. At this moment in time, it's the best they can do -- given the internal politics and the inbred resistance to any change.

They are pleased they have called pedophilia a "grave crime," and have added it to a list that includes heresy and schism. One functionary rolls his eyes at that last bit: schism. Some cardinal from Avignon, he recalls, always shoves that in every Church document he can -- still trying to prove local loyalty all these centuries later. No matter. Whatever. Everyone in the room is satisfied.

All except one. He sits at the far edge of the massive table, half hidden in shadow. He drums his fingers on the table, his furrowed brow deeps the darkness over face. He worries that the new rules will make the Vatican seem "soft," and he firmly believes that softness has no place in Christendom. He fears that liberals will see the revision in church law as an opportunity to go all mushy again, like they did in the 1960s. He shudders as he recalls guitars, drums and tamborines flooding a space once only filled by organ music back at his local parish in those days. Not again, he vows as he shakes his head.

He then slowly but firmly raises his head, pushing his face into the candle-light, and says: "The attempted ordination of women."

The head functionary is not sure he's heard correctly. "I'm deeply sorry," he says. "But - but - what about it?"

"We must add it to the list."

"The list?"

"Of grave crimes. Right there. Next to pedophilia."

The chief bureaucrat exhales and gathers his patience. Everyone, I imagine, is always very polite in situations such as this, and the manager will be no different. "No doubt this is true," he says. "But -- for now, only for now -- let's keep the focus on challenges presented to church law by the pedophilia crisis."

The other man raises an eyebrow. This won't do, not in the slightest -- and in a few words he makes clear that only his absolutist stand will display proper horror at the female ordination problem.

Now, perhaps the main functionary wants to confront the other. He really does. But perhaps, I imagine, he's also

read a recent column [1]by Jesuit Father James Martin, noting how intolerant the Vatican has become to any discussion let alone dissent - and how fear seems to rule decision-making in Rome. And the functionary knows this to be true, deep deep inside.

And so he smiles, again politely. He nods and grabs a quill pen.

Slowly, elegantly, in his best Latin, he adds: "The attempted ordination of women."

It is done.

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[1] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-james-martin-sj/a-fear-based-church-why-a_b_640884.html