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This is no way to end religious illiteracy

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 10, 2010 All Things Catholic

Mayor "Diamond" Joe Quimby, from the TV series "The Simpsons," once found himself listening to talk radio while a Rush Limbaugh wannabe derided him as an "illiterate, tax-cheating, wife-swapping, pot-smoking spendocrat." Quimby's wounded response was, "Hey ... I am no longer illiterate!"

I sometimes flash on that scene while listening to people complain about media coverage of religion, and of the Catholic church -- that it's biased, sensationalistic, sloppy, or whatever. I wish I could reply, "Hey ... at least we're no longer illiterate." By that I mean "illiterate" about religion, lacking a grasp of the A, B C's of belief and practice.

Three items this week, however, suggest we've got some ground to cover if we want to catch up with Quimby.

'Head of the Church'

First was a correction in the *New York Times* to a story about reports that Cardinal Godfried Danneels of Belgium tried to cover up charges of sexual abuse against another Belgian bishop. The item had referred to Danneels as a "former cardinal," which obviously isn't correct, and the Times set the record straight.

Yet in doing so the Times actually perpetuated another error, by identifying Danneels as "the former head of the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium." (In fairness, virtually every story about Danneels in the last couple of weeks has used some variant of that formula.)

Here's the problem: There is no such thing as the "head of the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium," or any other country. Epic battles fought by the Vatican in the 18th and 19th centuries against Gallicanism, Febronianism, etc., were based on the principle that there is no "national church" with its own president or patriarch. There's the pope in Rome, and then there are dioceses around the world led by their bishops, with no real layer of authority in between.

True, the Archbishop of Brussels is the metropolitan of the whole country and holds a few carefully circumscribed powers over the other "suffragan" dioceses. Basically, however, each bishop calls his own shots; there's no "head of the Belgian church" to whom they report.

Some observers believe this reality is part of the problem when it comes to the sexual abuse crisis. There are more than 5,000 bishops in the world, and their only supervisor is the pope ? who can't, and probably shouldn't, be expected to ride herd on specific personnel moves and so on. Critics say that until there's a way to hold bishops accountable short of direct papal intervention, an important cause of the crisis will remain untreated.

Calling Danneels the "former head of the church in Belgium" thus perpetuates a misconception about how the church works -- one with consequences for diagnosing what went wrong in the sexual abuse crisis, and what may be needed to fix it.

'Senior Vatican Official'

On Tuesday a piece in the U.K.-based *Telegraph* carried the following headline: "Muslims will become majority in Europe, senior Vatican official warns." An alarmist subhead added: "European Christians must have more children or face the prospect of the continent becoming Islamized, a senior Vatican official has said."

Seeing that header, I wondered if the Cardinal Secretary of State, Tarcisio Bertone, had delivered a speech somewhere I didn't know about, or if the President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, French Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, maybe had given an interview to Le Monde that was making the rounds.

In any event, I held my breath, because pugnacious statements from the Vatican about Islam have a history of kicking up dust.

Then I drilled down into the article, and discovered that the "senior Vatican official" is an 81-year-old Italian priest named Fr. Pierro Gheddo, who in reality holds no Vatican position whatsoever. (In the index to the *Annuario*, where the names of Vatican personnel appear, he's not there.) Gheddo is a member of the Pontifical Institute of Foreign Missions, a religious order founded to support the overseas missions of the Milan archdiocese, but that no more makes him a Vatican official than being a Jesuit or Dominican makes one pope.

Gheddo is a veteran missionary and a prolific author and speaker. For the record, he serves as postulator for three sainthood causes, but that doesn't make him a "Vatican official" either, and certainly not a "senior" one.

In other words, this is a bit like the *Washington Post* taking a comment from a retired analyst from the Brookings Institute, who has no job at the White House and who couldn't even get into the building without permission, and trying to pass it off as coming from a "senior administration official."

It's hard to tell whether this was an honest mistake, or a deliberate act of "sexing up" a story. In any event, it was dangerous -- whenever you stoke the clash of civilizations, you're playing with fire.

'God, not Jobs'

Last week the Vatican released a message from Pope Benedict XVI for World Youth Day, set for Madrid in August 2011. It was a Biblically-inspired reflection on how young people need something they can count on, drawing on imagery of roots and branches.

Benedict also offered a rare biographical aside:

"In thinking of my own youth, I realize that stability and security are not the questions that most occupy the minds of young people. True enough, it is important to have a job and thus to have firm ground beneath our feet, yet the years of our youth are also a time when we are seeking to get the most out of life. When I think back on that time, I remember above all that we were not willing to settle for a conventional middle-class life."

The pope went on to suggest that the natural desire of young people for "something great, something new" can only be satisfied in God. Whatever one makes of that, the fact the pope said it was hardly news, so most media outlets took a pass.

In Italy, however, where ignoring the pope just isn't an option, reporters instead went a little *meshuggeneh*, straining to connect Benedict's reference to "stability and security" to a heated national debate over jobs policy. In effect, they implied, the pope was endorsing outsourcing and downsizing, a shift to part-time jobs without benefits, and other forms of economic insecurity. One header actually had the pope saying: "A job doesn't bring happiness, it's better to believe in God."

That might seem laughable in light of Benedict's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, where he called on leaders to "prioritize the goal of access to steady employment for everyone" and described being out of work as a source of "great psychological and spiritual suffering." Even in Italy, however, few people actually sit down and chew over 30,000-word papal texts.

As a result, Vatican officials were constrained to call up reporters for background bitch sessions, and *L'Avvenire* , the newspaper of the Italian bishops, published a rap on the knuckles. Editor Marco Tarquinio acidly wrote that if the media used to be dominated by what novelist Vance Packard described as "hidden persuaders," today we have a pack of "obvious dissuaders" ? pundits who "know how to write better than anyone else, but who seem to have a problem with reading."

Such blatant distortions make it borderline understandable when some Vatican officials reply to calls for a better media strategy by saying, "Why bother? They're just going to make it up anyway."

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What's the take-away on all this?

In themselves, these episodes are hardly earth-shattering. The Danneels thing is a common misconception, the "senior Vatican official" hype in the *Telegraph* doesn't seem to have had much bite, and nobody outside Italy picked up the silly exegesis of the pope. One might be tempted to say, "No harm, no foul."

Yet it's precisely the "business as usual" feel that's troubling. What these instances illustrate is that a degree of sloppiness and imprecision is routine when it comes to religion that wouldn't fly elsewhere. (Imagine an item about Rod Blagojevich describing him as "the former emperor of Illinois," and you'll see what I mean.)

If religious illiteracy is to be stamped out, we'll have to do better. May the spirit of Joe Quimby be with us!

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