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Weigel's attack is a smokescreen

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Mar. 16, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

Norman Mailer advised writers to "learn to kill your little darlings," and "how much you must leave out to get this little bit in."

George Weigel, the not inexperienced author of "The End of the Bernardin Era [1]" amazes the reader with how much he has left out to get so little in and so much wrong.

Why is Weigel so defensive about Bernardin that, a decade and a half after his death, he proclaims the end of what he terms the Bernardin Era and the "Bernardin Machine"?

Chicago has accepted the slurs of outsiders at the civic efficiencies of the Democratic Machine and the Daley Machine but it will not suffer what it has never known, anything ever dubbed the Bernardin Machine. The writer invents a mantra that will fit his preconceptions about Bernardin and erase him from Catholic memory.

He sees a vast Left Wing ecclesiastical conspiracy that was spearheaded by the late Cardinal John Dearden of Detroit who was elected the first president of the National Conference of Bishops after Vatican II. One of his alleged sinister moves, earlier abetted by Atlanta's Archbishop Paul Hallinan who had appointed Joseph Bernardin as his auxiliary bishop in 1966, was to ask Bernardin to serve as the first general secretary of the reorganized bishops' conference.

The author's scenario suggests that the Dearden/Bernardin team created a Vichy-like regime of a leftist/liberal church that betrayed his idea of true Catholicism. What Weigel leaves out is a Council of the church, Vatican II (1962-1965) whose pastoral purpose, as Pope John XXIII intended, was to open the church to the needs of the suffering and searching world and to identify the church as a pilgrim people of God called to serve rather than to conquer it.

What Weigel leaves out to get so little in includes the documents of that council that revived the principle of "collegiality" that affirmed that each bishop, including the bishop of Rome, derives his authority from his consecration as a bishop rather than as a delegation from the authority of the pope. The principle undergirded the Council's establishment of National Conferences of Bishops with authority to deal with problems particular to their region. It is not hard to find this affirmation of collegiality or of the strengthened role of national conferences in the documents of Vatican II.

Dearden and Bernardin shared the task of overseeing the implementation of the council decrees and to guarantee that the national conference fulfilled the vision of Vatican II in serving the needs of Catholics in the United States. Rejecting entreaties to speak out on controversial subjects, Dearden argued that his "first commitment was to make the conference as solid and strong as possible."

Apparently concerned that Vatican II's return to collegiality might weaken the papal centrality of Vatican I, Weigel views Dearden and Hallinan as the architects, with Bernardin the sub-contractor, of a structure ratified by the apostolic delegate, the Belgian Archbishop Jean Jadot, of a collaterally descending network of new

bishops, selected like lodge brothers to serve the secret cause of watering down traditional Catholicism with draughts of left-wing liberalism. What they were in fact doing was implementing the teachings of Vatican Council II.

Weigel, however, omits any mention of Vatican II and its documents, illustrating his apparent disregard for what he insists that he reveres, the authority of the church. His selective allegiance makes him a "cafeteria Catholic" who cherrypicks historical information so that he seems uninformed about how bishops have been charged by Rome with recommending future bishops throughout the history of the church. It is impossible to believe that a man so steeped in the accidents of Catholic tradition has not consulted the 1983 Revision of the Code of Canon Law in which canon 377.3 details the process. While bishops may make recommendations, it is the pontifical legate, now papal nuncio Archbishop Pietro Sambi, who composes and submits the list to the Apostolic See.

The true godfather of the 20th century lineage of bishops in the United States was then-Fr. Edward Francis Hoban (1878-1966), who became chancellor of the Chicago archdiocese in 1906. While there and as bishop of nearby Rockford, Ill., he grew close to Archbishop Amleto Cicognani, then apostolic delegate to the United States, who forwarded the Episcopal recommendations to Rome.

Cicognani was instrumental in making Hoban the bishop of Cleveland, Ohio, the smoky city that became the unlikely epicenter of clerical power in the United States. From the priests of this diocese Hoban selected Paul Hallinan for the Atlanta archdiocese and sent John Dearden to Pittsburgh on his way to Detroit as cardinal archbishop.

Hoban also selected John Krol, the first Polish-American to be elevated for an important ecclesiastical career. He later became the cardinal archbishop of Philadelphia and, like Dearden, a president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Weigel is much exercised that when Bernardin became president of the conference of bishops, he recommended, as is the duty of any man in that position, future bishops. What lies behind Weigel's objections to this normal procedure? His unease arises from his hypothesizing ulterior motives and low liberal politics in Bernardin's steady efforts to seek consensus among the bishops on significant issues, including the composition of the pastoral letter on nuclear war. He thinks Bernardin stacked the committee that included the former chief of chaplains, Archbishop John O'Connor of New York, and the well known peace activist, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit by also appointing some go-along bishops of little public note.

The peace pastoral

The letter represented a practical example of collegiality, characterized by hard work and a willingness to seek an acceptable document no matter how many hours of meetings it required. Ignoring the preparatory hearings held across the country, Weigel seems more concerned that this pastoral letter was planned to subvert President Ronald Reagan's rearmament policies rather than to explore one of the most explosive issues of a nuclear armed world.

Despite its dismissal by Weigel as missing the point of Reagan's policies, the pastoral letter attracted the attention of the entire country, earning it, for example, a cover story in *The New York Times Magazine*. The Catholic bishops emerged as perhaps the only cohort in American life with sufficient moral authority to conduct a public meditation on the dread potential of nuclear war and the range of ethical issues connected with that possibility.

The writer indicts Bernardin in his every move, including, in what he describes as, in 1968, Bernardin's "ill-fated attempt to settle the disciplinary situation in the Archdiocese of Washington, where dissent (from *Humanae Vitae*

, Pope Paul VI's encyclical on birth control) was widespread and public." The writer scoffs at Rome's efforts to seek a peaceful detente between Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle and the Washington priests whom he suspended when they published a statement presenting the traditional Catholic theological teaching that people must follow their own consciences.

O'Boyle, at heart a gallant progressive who had, for example, desegregated the Catholic schools in Washington long before the famous 1954 Supreme Court ruling, felt that the pope' authority was at stake and, consulting with Jesuit moral theologian Fr. John Ford, issued a letter defending his disciplinary actions and condemning the priests' statement. Many parishioners walked out of church when this was read and Rome felt that O'Boyle's tactics were making a bad situation worse. Weigel apparently wants to leave the impression that Bernardin was in some way the self-appointed mediator who exacerbated the situation and that the fiery O'Boyle was a longsuffering Thomas More.

It was the Holy See, however, that commissioned Bernardin to intervene to effect an honorable peace between O'Boyle and his priests while at the same time defending the teaching of the church. Rome imposed a condition that increased the assignment's difficulty by forbidding Bernardin to divulge to O'Boyle or the priests that he was deputed by the Vatican to resolve the situation. O'Boyle, therefore, resisted and resented Bernardin's efforts to settle the matter and was overheard saying, at the bishops' meeting in 1974 at which Bernardin was elected president, "I only came so I could vote against him."

Weigel acknowledges that Bernardin was not just giving cover to dissenters in his famous Fordham lecture on the consistent ethic of life in which he did not, however, seek "symmetry" between abortion and such varied issues as infant nutrition and the death penalty. Bernardin himself readily acknowledged the differing moral valences of these questions. His aim was to explore the wide range of related concerns to which Catholics must attend if they believe in the dignity of life and the value of the individual human person that supported their strong Pro-Life position. Weigel therefore fails to see how this proposal was an effort to effect a ceasefire in the brutal culture wars so that Pro-Life issues could be presented with a better chance of engaging the pro-choice forces that showed no interest in learning the nature of the pro-life position.

He dismisses as fatuous what he terms Bernardin's efforts to involve the church in events of the day. He does not acknowledge or seem to know that the bishops were applying well-established principles from Catholic theology and papal encyclicals in their pastoral letter on nuclear war and their subsequent one on the American economy.

What, indeed, lies behind this attack on Bernardin if not his need to make other church leaders and their activities less visible to the public? The screen he raises to shield the latter is transparent and readers can see through it to identify the prelates whose inter-relationships and collaborations he is eager to conceal. The writer thereby reveals what he is so anxious to conceal -- the real name of the "machine" that is running out of gas and the prelate whose "era" is coming to an end.

A tactic of misdirection

Weigel's tactic of misdirection is in no place more apparent than when he inspects scandal ridden Boston and identifies Fr. Bryan Hehir as the problem, the sinister eminence grise behind the development of many of Bernardin's initiatives. He cannot distract us from Cardinal Bernard Law who made his way to the lofty eminence of Boston from another surprising center of episcopal power, the tiny diocese of Cape Girardeau-Springfield, Mo., in which he succeeded William Baum, who then succeeded O'Boyle in Washington before going on to a curial post in Rome.

Cape Girardeau-Springfield became the Cape Canaveral of American ecclesiastical culture, the launching site for influential careers in the major dioceses of the country. John P. Cody's measured post-war rise from St.

Louis to become a major player in American Catholicism signaled the rise of the Midwest as the source for new leaders in the church. William Wakefield Baum became its third bishop after consecration by John Carberry, the Brooklyn native who had risen, by way of the relatively small dioceses of Lafayette, Ind., and Columbus, Ohio, to become cardinal archbishop of St. Louis. The fussy Carberry, who accused apostolic delegate Jean Jadot of destroying the American church, sat obsessively, worrying that the Eucharist in the hand might lead to hosts stolen for Black Masses, in the middle of a group of bishops who were determined to question Vatican II and the work of Dearden and Bernardin. As Baum set the table for Law to follow him in Missouri so he also arranged his own succession in Washington, D.C. by Archbishop James Hickey, a prelate known, in his dealings with his priests and others, to be as sweetly smiling and controlling as Carberry was with his.

Law came to dominate the group by his careful cultivation of Pope John Paul II who viewed him as his loyal emissary and source in the United States. Bernardin himself recognized that, after Law became cardinal archbishop of Boston in 1984, saying, "Bernie has all the say in Rome now. I intend to continue to do my work as well as I can." Law, who was and remains a member of the council that makes bishops, pleased John Paul II by forwarding only candidates for the bishopric who had never spoken a word on any controversial issue. The resulting crop of generally non-creative but intensely orthodox bishops took their cues from Law on everything, including how to manage, as he thought they could, the already developing scandal of sex abuse by their priests.

Law invited Oblate Fr. Francis George to Boston in 1987 as coordinator of what Law conceived of as a conservative think tank, the Circle of Fellows for the Cambridge Studies of Faith and Culture. In 1990, Law had him appointed bishop of Yakima, Wash.

It was, however, during the 1980s dominated by Law that investigative journalist Jason Berry broke open the truth about the child molesting Louisiana priest Gilbert Gauthe, unwrapping the scandal that had been buried in the ecclesiastical pyramid. Law reassured the pope that it was exaggerated by the press and that it was under control. Weigel criticizes the American bishops for turning to psychology to deal with the sex abuse crisis rather than applying the principles of moral theology. He does not speculate on whether Law had a moral obligation to inform Pope John Paul II fully and accurately about this growing problem.

Nor does he mention that, while Law was downplaying the sex abuse crisis, Bernardin was leading the bishops in developing the first extensive protocol for dealing systematically with priests and other church workers accused of sex abuse. Several bishops followed Bernardin's Chicago guidelines in developing procedures in their own dioceses.

Weigel further obscures Law's control of American Catholicism in the last part of the 20th century by suggesting that New York's John O'Connor took over the selection of American bishops in the United States. The pope admired O'Connor but his influence in appointing bishops was limited as was evident when Law sent successors to Brooklyn and Rockville Centre, N.Y., dioceses of which O'Connor was metropolitan. Law also eagerly supported the pope's 1993 letter, *Apostolos Suos*, that gutted national conferences of bishops of any authority in composing pastoral letters on local or regional issues by demanding that the topics and the drafts be first sent for approval to Rome.

Perhaps the best example Law's *modus operandi* is his reaction to the news, in 1995, that Bernardin had pancreatic cancer and a 25 percent chance of living five years. Law immediately moved his compliant protégé, Francis George, from Yakima to Portland, Ore., where he would be an archbishop and so prepared to be transferred to Chicago after Bernardin's death. All in a cold-blooded day's work in the higher realms of ecclesiastical power and of a piece with the glacial coolness with which Law had operated to prevent anybody's examining the sex abuse crisis ten years before.

In 1985, Law restrained the National Conference of Catholic Bishops from funding a proposal made by a group headed by Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle to investigate the still covered up sex abuse problems among priests.

Law also instructed the then-general secretary of the bishops' conference to return an even more detailed proposal from Bernardin to research the "homosexualization" of the priesthood to the archbishop of Chicago with a letter informing him that he would not submit it because "the bishops won't do anything about it." The bishops uneasily discussed the problem at their spring meeting in Collegeville, Minn., that year.

Had Law acted differently he might have saved grief for thousands of victims and mitigated the most serious scandal the church had suffered since the Reformation but, in fact, he was not about to allow this to become well known and he was confident that the pope would accept his interpretation of any media interest in the matter. The gods of irony shuddered, however, for they sensed that Law's Nixonian bravado was contributing to his own downfall after the sex abuse in his own archdiocese exploded in *The Boston Globe* just after New Year's Day in 2002 and he was forced to resign before Christmas.

Weigel puts the key to his cabinet of secrets into the reader's hands when he recounts the story of Bernardin's last initiative, the common ground project, which Weigel derides it as another effort to advance liberal views when, in fact, it was the dying Bernardin's deeply felt attempt to heal the polarized state of American Catholicism. The dying Bernardin was convinced that those termed progressives or conservatives could come together and affirm that what they held in common far outweighed what appeared to divide them. The writer here hands the reader the key to his attack on Bernardin. Law immediately attacked Bernardin, claiming that there was no need for dialogue when you had the magisterium of the church. Weigel mentions other critics, such Washington's Cardinal James Hickey and his predecessor, Cardinal William Baum, but he omits the name of the cardinal who spoke up first and whose affected righteousness his followers in crimson adopted and whose words they mimicked in their statements.

Perhaps Weigel omits Law's hurried criticism because Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles responded with a defense of Bernardin and a reminder that cardinals should not criticize each other in public. One understands why Weigel did not want to discuss the sordid affair. After Bernardin's funeral, Hickey shamefacedly asked Bernardin's closest aide, Msgr. Kenneth Velo, what the late cardinal had thought of his criticism. "He said," Velo responded without hesitation, "he would never have done it to you." It was the same answer Law received when he uneasily asked the same question.

Or perhaps Weigel omits Law because two years almost to the day after he criticized Bernardin, Law was swearing an oath that he would tell the truth at his deposition on sex abuse in Boston.

Leaving Law out, of course, allows us to see what makes him so nervous that he must create a sideshow about Bernardin to distract us from learning more about Law, his dubious relationship to Pope John Paul II, and his central role in naming bishops over the last 28 years in the American church.

Law has come a long way along the yellow brick clerical road from Cape Girardeau-Springfield but he now has no place to go and nothing to do but, like a Jamesian ex-patriate character, lives sadly on among the ruins of Rome and of his own career while still trying to run the American Catholic church for whose wounds he bears no small amount of responsibility. It is understandable that Weigel does not want to gauge the depth of this melancholy narrative and chooses to hide it behind prose that seems to have been written off the top of his head rather from the depths of his heart.

No wonder the ghost of Cardinal Bernardin makes him anxious. The truth about the Law Era and the Law Machine would not make pleasant reading.

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