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Maureen Dowd's Morality Play

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Distinctly Catholic

Maureen Dowd has found her hierarchic knight in shining armor, having paid a visit to Archbishop Dairmuid Martin of Dublin. If Dowd intended to hold Martin up as the prelate who faces one of the most difficult tasks in the universal Church, governing the archbishopric of Dublin at a time when the hierarchy and clergy of Ireland are beset by a sex abuse crisis, and to praise him for his candor in dealing with that crisis, or to acknowledge his resolve to do something about it, that would be fine.

Dowd being Dowd, however, she uses her praise of Archbishop Martin to heap coals upon the heads of the rest of the Church and especially the Vatican. And, Dowd being Dowd, she is more than a little careless with her sweeping claims and her recounting of recent history.

It is easiest to start with the minor distortions, all of them intended to create her morality play. Dowd writes: "In February, Martin held an unprecedented "Liturgy of Lament and Repentance" at a Dublin cathedral, where he asked forgiveness from God and victims of abuse and praised the courage of those who had come forward." Of course, the liturgy was unprecedented in Ireland but not elsewhere. Similar liturgies have been held in many U.S. cities, including Boston, which Dowd might have discovered if she had also bothered to notice Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston at the February service in Dublin.

O'Malley, of course, is the apostolic visitor to Dublin, which is to say he was sent there by the Vatican and, in Dowd's little morality play, the Vatican only consists of bad guys. O'Malley is also the man who dealt with one of the first sex abuse blow-ups in the early 1990s, the Porter case in Fall River, before being sent to Palm Beach to replace the first bishop who resigned due to charges of pedophilia, and finally to Boston, the epicenter of the crisis in the U.S. O'Malley is the equivalent of the cavalry on the issue of the sex abuse crisis, but because his role in Dublin was ordered by that meany, foot-dragging, fiddling Pope Benedict, O'Malley receives not a mention in Dowd's account.

Dowd writes: "Showing again that it prefers denial to remorse, the Vatican undermined Martin's call for accountability. In 2009, after the Irish government's 700-page Murphy report on sexual abuse came out, Pope Benedict XVI refused to accept the resignations of two Irish bishops who presided over dioceses where abuse cases were mishandled." Again she gets only half the story, failing to note that Pope Benedict XVI accepted the resignation of three Irish bishops. A journalist, or person of normal inquisitiveness, might ask: Why accept three resignations and not the other two? Maybe there is more to this story? Such details of fact, however, complicate the story and Dowd wants clarity in her morality play.

Dowd also fails to mention that Pope Benedict just last month ordered all the bishops in the world to devise norms for dealing with sex abuse and to abide by those norms. Is that foot dragging? And, if Dowd were disposed to do a bit of investigation, she would have learned that the Vatican has put out the word: bishops who do not follow the rules will be asked to resign. I wish this order had come out ten years ago. But, it is more than sloppy journalism to completely ignore the fact.

Dowd also repeats the canard about Cardinal Bernard Law, formerly of Boston, having a "cushy Vatican sanctuary." Setting aside the fact that Law's apartment and "sanctuary" are attached to the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore which, last time I checked, was on the Esquiline not the Vatican Hill, there is nothing "cushy" about Law's assignment as archpriest of that basilica. It is not the post to which he aspired. He knows and everyone in Rome knows he resigned in disgrace. But, hell, why not kick him while he is already down.

Dowd also gives her skewed point of view away when she writes, "Why did the church victimize victims by treating crimes as mere sins?" Mind you, these horrendous acts of depravity against children were always crimes both in church and civil law but, as any student of the sex abuse crisis knows, both the church and civil laws reflected little understanding of the nature of this crime. For example, a three or five year statute of limitations fails to recognize that many victims are unable to discuss their cases until adulthood. Was the Church to blame for these statutes of limitations in civil law? I admit that I am disgusted when the Church seeks to prevent legislatures from altering these statutes of limitation but even that is a complicated story. As I have written before, it is one thing to maintain personal accountability for past crimes for a longer period of time, but it is also necessary to recognize that our civil jurisprudence needs a separate set of penalties against non-profit organizations that face huge settlements. Who is hurt when the Church must pay millions of dollars? The poor and the needy who might otherwise benefit from the church-run programs those dollars fund. Laws should allow prosecutors to go after the perps, to be sure, but why make the schoolchildren who attend Catholic schools and the homeless who use Catholic shelters, and the hungry who are fed in Catholic Church soup kitchens suffer?

And, what can she mean by the phrase "mere sins"? Sins are never mere and they warrant a penalty greater than any civil court can assess. Dowd takes no cognizance.

I have not been shy about calling out bishops who fail to live up to the norms they themselves have established for the protection of children, to say nothing of the norms of decency.. In February, upon the release of the Grand Jury Report in Philadelphia, this column was the first to call for the resignation of Cardinal Justin Rigali. But, the record of Pope Benedict in dealing with the sex abuse crisis is far better than that of his predecessor and deserves a better account than Dowd's skewed vision permits. Again, such complications would take away from the simple, Manichean worldview that gives her little morality play its sense of clarity. But, facts, too, provide clarity and Dowd, as a journalist, should concern herself with them. Instead, she rants. I am glad she has found an archbishop she likes and admires. Perhaps, once he is done trying to help the Church of Ireland rediscover its soul the good Archbishop of Dublin can help Ms. Dowd rediscover hers. But, good luck finding it.

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