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Invincible ignorance and the bishops

Phyllis Zagano | Aug. 1, 2012 Just Catholic

Many years ago, Cardinal John O'Connor told me about "invincible ignorance" -- you can't be blamed for what you're not taught. He said point-blank that the bishops responsible for invincible ignorance are the guilty ones.

Now some of those same bishops and their successors are foundering in a sea of rhetoric, sinking by weights of their own making. They might want to talk about abortion and the rest, but nothing they say is heard.

What are they talking about, anyway?

Toledo's Bishop Leonard P. Blair took to National Public Radio to deride the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and its president, paying lip-service to the horrendous episcopal malfeasances and cover-ups turning the stomachs of the world. His message: We're in charge, and they will do what we tell them to do.

Blair wants LCWR to talk about abortion? What has he done? What has he said about Pan Chunyan? She was, after all, on the front page of *USA Today* not long ago. In fact, what has any bishop said about her?

Missed it?

It would have been a great Sunday homily topic. In the best of all possible worlds, your bishop would have used his email list to tell his priests and deacons about that *USA Today* story [1]. Eight Chinese government workers kidnapped a pregnant Pan Chunyan, 31, from her little store in Fujian city even as her husband was raising the requisite $8,640 third-child fee. Time ran out for Pan Chunyan, so the police led a seven-car convoy to the hospital, where she was injected with chemicals to kill her unborn child.

Did I tell you Pan was eight months pregnant? Or that when they delivered her perfect stillborn son, he had blackened, peeling skin?

Then there is seven-months-pregnant Feng Jianmei, 27, dragged from her home in Shaanxi province. Same thing: hospitals, injections, stillborn perfect baby, this time a girl.

Now, indirection is often the best way to convince folks of something. As I understand it, the U.S. Catholic bishops fear the time-tested concept of religious liberty is at stake because the Supreme Court upheld the Affordable Care Act -- "Obamacare" -- which requires all non-ministerial agencies to provide no-cost prescription contraceptives, IUDs, morning-after pills and sterilization. That means St. You-name-it University must give whatever to employees and students free of charge.

Could we please have a reality check here? Personally, I think there is lots wrong with free birth control, abortifacients and sterilization for any number of reasons even beyond the "Catholic" ones. I mean, has anybody talked about entitlement? The object of birth control at the undergraduate level is avoiding the law of consequences -- playing without paying -- and now the government wants to double the free-play idea. For everybody?

Beyond entitlement, is anybody talking about what happens to women's bodies when they've been encouraged to take birth control pills, use patches or under-the-skin rods between the ages of 13 and 50? Is there an endocrinologist in the house?

And beyond entitlement and damaging hormones, is anybody talking about what ends up in the water supply? (Years ago, they found traces of Prozac in the Thames, and folks near Cork Harbor in Ireland still joke about how helpful Pfizer's Viagra manufacturing plant has been.)

These are all real reasons -- intellectual, physical, environmental -- to seriously question the mandate for universal free birth control. These are all real reasons to add to Catholic arguments against IUDs (highly creepy, to say the least, when stopping implantation of fertilized ova) and sterilization. If religious organizations can't opt out, what's next?

So what have the bishops done? Rather than address the sex mess directly and life issues indirectly, they've done the opposite. What bishop has directly apologized, granted full disclosure, called off his litigators and/or stepped down? What bishop has given life and breadth to the real issues behind Obamacare and connected them to the way the rest of the world operates? There must be one. Maybe two?

The first point in PR planning is to know the audience.

Here's the deal: The primary audience for life issue discussion is not Congress and not the media, and not even the good people in the pews who, after all, are in the pews. The primary audience is the on-the-ground ministers of life itself, the believable women who hold hands and help unburden hearts. Got a guess who they are?

So when a Catholic bishop directly attacks one of their many leaders because, he says, she and they don't do what is objectively his job, he and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops incur a double loss.

First: That bishop, and by extension all bishops, lose even more credibility.

Second: The sex mess again trumps abortion in the public mind.

These days we're watching the men of the church dropping their teaching portfolios to run after women who serve. That's not the way to win friends and influence people. O'Connor was right about invincible ignorance. Like or dislike his political philosophy, you have to admit he was a pretty classy guy. He spoke so he could be heard.

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