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

If the bishops want to lead, they must first listen

Brian Cahill | Sep. 12, 2012

Opinion

A friend who is a faithful Catholic and is at daily Mass once told me the Catholic hierarchy's idea of communication and public relations seems to be purchasing thousands of gallons of kerosene to pour on the flames they themselves ignited.

The loss of credibility and moral authority of American bishops comes from the abuse scandal, the insensitive treatment of women and gays, and the emphasis on orthodoxy and authority. But the bishops also have been ineffective at public relations. There are many examples.

Cardinal Raymond Burke, head of the Vatican's highest court, the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, said the failure of "knowledge and application of canon law" was a "significant contribution" to the sex abuse scandal. He seems to be saying that if only those pedophile priests had paid more attention to their canon law class, they would have behaved themselves, and if all the delinquent bishops had just consulted their canon lawyers, they never would have covered up any of this.

Cardinal Timothy Dolan navigated his way through the national conventions, but commenting on President Barack Obama's health care mandate, suggested that if contraception is available, perhaps prostitution services should be available for men with erectile dysfunction. Dolan also compared homosexuality to incest and reminded us that "we bishops are pastors, not politicians," and reassured us that "it's not that we hold fast, that we're stubborn ideologues, no." Dolan has trumpeted his friendship and admiration of vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan, saying he "wants to see him in action."

Archbishop Samuel Aquila of Denver likes Ryan's fiscal prudence and suggests we should not ignore Ryan's message just "because the consequences seem compassionless." Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wis., praises Ryan's "accomplishments as a native son and brother in the faith" and suggests his budget proposals involve "choices where intrinsic evil is not involved," ignoring that Ryan, if he gets his way, will do great harm to the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.

Baltimore Archbishop William Lori, the point man for the bishops' religious liberty campaign, issued a bitter, sarcastic response to *America* magazine's editorial itemizing the flaws of the bishops' position. Lori refused to

participate in a Catholic university discussion on homosexuality and Catholicism because such a discussion "might weaken Church teaching," and he was a prominent witness at the futile, all-male House Republican hearing to consider overriding the contraception mandate.

The bishops continue to insist the mandate is a new, limiting definition of a religious entity, but the language comes from an earlier California law mandating contraception, similar to laws in 20 other states. Only one California bishop challenged the law, and he lost. Contraception remained in our health plan at San Francisco Catholic Charities, and life went on.

Contrary to what the bishops claim today, the government is not saying to Catholic Charities and Catholic hospitals that they can only hire and serve Catholics. It is simply saying that if they hire and serve without regard to religious faith, then they have to play by the rules of the pluralistic society in which they choose to function.

An irony of the religious liberty debate has been the bishops' condemnations of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's *Quest for the Living God* and Sr. Margaret Farley's *Just Love*. It is noteworthy that Dolan got his doctorate in church history at The Catholic University of America under Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, then the dean of American Catholic church historians. In 1964, Ellis wrote, "If we try to obstruct Catholic intellectuals, we obstruct the progress of our Church."

Other examples of the "kerosene approach" include Cardinal William Levada using the term "dialogue of the deaf" in reference to the controversy with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and his complaint that some critics are not representing the church "with any reasonable sense of product identity." Last year in Philadelphia, responding to a grand jury report documenting 37 priests still in active ministry despite serious allegations of sex abuse against them, Cardinal Justin Rigali stated there were no such priests in active ministry. One month later, and almost 10 years after the Dallas Charter, the archdiocese suspended 21 priests.

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago compared gay and lesbian advocates to the Klu Klux Klan. Bishop Daniel Jenky of Peoria, Ill., compared Obama to Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Bishop David Zubik of Pittsburgh told his flock that the Obama administration is saying "to hell with you." Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput said "contempt for religious faith has been growing." If there is any growth in contempt, it is for American bishops who are not acting like shepherds. The issue is pastoral leadership, not faith.

Harvey Cox in *The Future of Faith* and Diana Butler Bass in *Christianity after Religion* assure us that while the future of religion is a bit shaky, Jesus' message of love and compassion is alive and well, and the future of faith is solid and viable.

No one is suggesting church leaders stay out of the political arena, but they should understand that overt partisanship, authoritarian arrogance and insensitive or inflammatory rhetoric don't work. They should influence public policy as pastors and not try to exercise political muscle. And they always have to manage the tension between our Catholic identity and how we advocate our values in a pluralistic society.

Some leaders know how to communicate. Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., has not only publicly questioned the bishops' contraception lawsuit, but has consistently spoken out on behalf of the poor and vulnerable and clearly articulated the deficiencies in Paul Ryan's budget. Joliet, Ill., Bishop Daniel Conlon, the point man for the bishops on sex abuse, had the courage and integrity to acknowledge that the "credibility of the bishops on the subject of child abuse is shredded." Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, has written a plea for civility and dialogue on the political issues we face both as Americans and as Catholics, and for creating a Catholic vision of "collaboration, not coercion." He asks us to listen to each other.

Our bishops need to listen. If they want to discern where the people of God are going, they should listen to Tom

Roberts, *NCR* editor at large and author of *The Emerging Catholic Church*; Fr. Michael Crosby, author of *Rebuild this House*; *NCR* contributor Michael Leach, author of *Why Stay Catholic?*; and yes, Johnson and Farley.

If they want to learn how to communicate and stop subsidizing the kerosene industry, they should listen to Sr. Simone Campbell, whose Nuns on the Bus was not just about ministry, justice and charity, but a brilliant model of effective communication and public relations, unlike the bishops' Fortnight for Freedom.

If they want to lead, they should listen to Sr. Sandra Schneiders, who in her address to the recent LCWR meeting, suggested that "Gospel leadership" consists of leaders who "emerge from the community," leaders who practice "anticipatory leadership," discerning and preparing the community for coming change, and leaders who not only "act efficaciously, but live with "integrity."

If they want to reclaim their lost credibility and moral authority, they should listen to Thomas Merton, who in a 1967 interview stated, "There can be no question that the great crisis in the Church today is the crisis of authority brought on by the fact that the Church as an institution and organization, has in practice, usurped the place of the Church as a community of persons united in love and in Christ."

He goes on to say that "love is equated with obedience and conformity" and "is overshadowed by intolerance, suspicion and fear." Church leaders become "calculating and anxious," and in their desire to head off opposition, create opposition and lose credibility. He concludes, "It may mean the complete destruction of the Church as a powerful institution."

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Source URL (retrieved on *04/02/2015 - 02:50*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/if-bishops-want-lead-they-must-first-listen