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Contra Winters on Mahony and mercy

Tom Roberts | Mar. 7, 2013 NCR Today

When my friend and colleague Michael Sean Winters earlier this week argued [1], in the name of mercy, against those who wish Cardinal Roger Mahony would stay away from the upcoming conclave, he raised as a precedent those (I among them) who objected to Cardinal Raymond Burke?s warning that he would deny communion to Sen. John Kerry because of the senator?s pro-choice stance.

I think the example of Burke was a first step in the wrong direction. Winters duly noted that few bishops, and certainly not the pope, followed Burke?s advice. Burke, after all, wanted to use his authority to punish people because of their political tactics. He was generally fond of excommunicating people in and about St. Louis, something that , curiously, hasn?t occurred since he shipped off to Rome.

Politicians in such cases may be in need of mercy, but they?re in far greater need of votes. Catholics who find them reprehensible can vote them out of office.

Cardinal Mahony may be in need of mercy. He has certainly made a rather maudlin public case for himself, comparing the outrage some have leveled at him with the suffering of Jesus. In lieu of turning the other cheek, as his comparison might seem to compel, he has instead so twisted the story that he becomes the victim who , in a grand show of magnanimity, offers forgiveness to his oppressors. If ever the assembled cardinals want an example of how secularism can corrode any sense of decency and elevate self-interest to a polished art, they need only consult their colleague from Los Angeles.

One of his most recent iterations of the ?I didn?t know better? defense is this: ?What I did in those years [of sheltering known sexual abusers of children from church and legal authorities] was consistent with what everybody did, in the Boy Scouts , in public schools, private schools, across the country.? I defy any lay person to take into confession or spiritual counseling or whatever one might call it today and offer up as an excuse for some egregious offense against humanity, say children, the rationale that what you did was consistent with what everyone else in the culture was doing.

Even if one were to accept that line of reasoning, Mahony is simply wrong and, once again, self serving.

First, this is what he knew. He knew enough about how awful the offenses were that he felt he had to hide them at all costs. He had to make sure that priests were shipped from parish to parish, diocese to diocese, even out of the country to avoid detection. He knew that he couldn?t tell the truth to those to whom the offending priests were delivered. He couldn?t tell pastors, certainly not the parents of those abused or the adults in the parishes where the priests were sent.

He knew the offenses were bad enough -- safe to say, sinful enough -- that he dipped into the archdiocesan treasury to pay millions in hush money, and in 2007, hundreds of millions in settlements to hundreds of alleged victims. And the settlement came just in time to avoid having to take the witness stand to testify under oath.

He knew that the narrative of the offenses -- the sins -- portrayed in files and documented in thousands of pages

of correspondence and depositions were so damaging that he would spend years, untold millions in lawyers? fees and countless hours of his own time in an attempt to keep secret what he had agreed to release as part of the settlement.

And when he and his legal team eventually reached the end of the road, when judges reached the end of their patience, when the plaintiffs finally won, and the truth came rolling out, unfiltered, unvarnished, unspun, the outrage he anticipated was unleashed anew.

His response was to once again speak of ?mistakes? and reiterate that he was just doing what everyone else was doing.

And even that?s not true, because Boy Scouts, school districts, even families have nowhere near the resources that bishops had access to in their attempts to maintain secrecy. No organization had as many potential hiding places as the Catholic Church.

Cardinal Mahony certainly comes in for mercy, and our pity. My colleague, Michael, appeals to the words of absolution, which call on ?God, the Father of Mercies,? to forgive our sins. I, for one, am immeasurably grateful that it is a God of infinite mercy and not a god of infinite wrath and judgment, that we lean most heavily upon in these moments.

At the same time, those words, in our sacramental tradition, carry the expectation that the sin has been named and forgiveness sought. So far, all we?ve heard is that ?mistakes? were made, and that everybody else did the same.

I want Cardinal Mahony in the conclave for quite a different reason than that advanced by Winters. I want him in there as a living reminder to the others of how serious the stakes are, of how much fundamental reform is required.

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