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# The Sorry Media Spectacle

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 13, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Last night, my friend Chris Matthews had me on his show ?Hardball [1]? to talk about the issues facing the Church at this moment of transition. The other guest was a woman named Mary Johnson, a former nun who has a new book chronicling her decision to leave her order, and ? I have not read it but Chris told me about this ? her sexual affairs first with a woman, then with a man. Of course, I have no intention of reading about this sexual omnivore?s habits, but I wish to address something she said last night on the program that has been said in different ways by different people over the past few weeks since Benedict?s resignation.

Ms. Johnson took a question about the pedophilia crisis and started in on the need to think about married priests and women priests. She noted that ?priests are lonely.? She then acknowledged that pedophilia ?is another matter.? Indeed it is. So, why then did Ms. Johnson bring up the issues of clerical celibacy when asked about pedophilia?

The sex abuse crisis illustrated much that is wrong with the clerical culture in our Church. As I said yesterday, indeed as I said eleven years ago in 2002, the sex abuse crisis started with the molestation of children the way Watergate started with a burglary. We know that in any walk of life, there will be pedophiles. The scandal is that instead of addressing the horror, the leaders of the Church covered it up. Often the same dynamic happens in other institutions and even in families, when it is the perpetrator, not the victim, whom people seek to shield. Here we see original sin on full display, in all its ugly, tenacious rigor: a fear of the light.

But what the hell does any of that have to do with the doctrinal issue of ordaining women? Or with the disciplinary rule of celibacy? I do think, and have long thought, that the Church?s response to the sex abuse crisis was formed in part by an awareness that the people in the pews no longer listen to the Church?s authorities on sexual matters. Especially in America, where the Calvinism of the ambient culture got all mixed up with a kind of residual Irish Jansenism, both the Catholic left and the Catholic right have been willing co-conspirators in foisting the idea on Catholics that the most important thing to know about a Catholic is what they do with their pelvis. This is insane. If you spend even a little time in a Catholic culture, from Italy to Spain to Latin America, you do not see the kind of cultural hang-ups about sex.

There is an old joke. An Italian man goes to confession in his parish in Naples. The priest recognizes his voice and notes that he has not heard from the man in some time. ?I was in the hospital, I head a heart attack,? the man says. ?I had no idea,? the priest replies. ?No, my wife would not have told you because I had the attack when I was fooling around with the new girl at the office,? the penitent explained. The priest grows very grave. ?My son, you have responsibilities to your family. You cannot risk having another heart attack by chasing all these skirts. As your confessor, I forbid you from having sex with anyone but your wife and your mistress.?

Those last three words ?and your mistress? are not the kind of thing one would hear from an Irish-American confessor. Perhaps some moral theologians will explain to me that they are horrified by those words. I sympathize entirely with the poor wife for whom the fact of the mistress may be very painful. But, I also discern

in those words a deep sympathy with the human condition.

People tend to think the Catholic Church is obsessed with sex but it is a strange charge coming from a culture that has turned sex into an industry and cheapened it beyond belief, creating a hook-up culture that is truly horrifying in the human casualties it leaves in its wake. Ms. Johnson may have encountered the loneliness of celibacy, but I can assure her that the hook-up culture produces an abyss of loneliness and, unlike the Church, offers nothing in the way of support to ameliorate that loneliness except more of sexual partners, kinkier sexual practices, and a deeper and more vulgar voyeurism that forces itself in your face every time you check out at the grocery store and the tabloids announce some latest sexual news.

The Church has faced scandals before. We all watched ?The Borgias? ? but at least the Borgias stayed away from doctrinal matters. The fact that we find human failings in the Church, even outrageous human failings, does not subtract one iota of the certainty with which I profess the Creed each Sunday at Mass.

Ms. Johnson is not alone in trying to create false linkages between scandals and doctrine. CNN often features Rev. Albert Cutie, who used to be a Catholic priest and then fell in love and became an Episcopalian. I sympathize entirely with a priest who, having intended to keep his vows for many years, nonetheless discovers himself in love and feels he can no longer keep his priestly vows. But, to run to the Episcopalians? Does the fact that a man feels his heart drawn to a woman require him to abandon his views on apostolic succession? Every time I see Cutie, I am reminded of King Charles II of England. It is often remembered that he said ?Presbyterianism is no religion for a gentleman.? It is less often recalled that the King added, ?And Anglicanism is no religion for a Christian.?

It is also funny to see a narrative that has been with us for a long time, namely, the idea that if the cardinals were to select a cardinal from, say, Africa or Latin America, this would portend great changes in the Church on issues like celibacy or the ordination of women. Of course, in Africa, the people of God are not clamoring for women clergy or same-sex marriage. Indeed, I might note as well that the Second Vatican Council is no way resulted from a popular movement among the Catholic laity. You will search in vain in the historical accounts of the 1950s for Catholic any evidence of the Catholic laity urging ecclesial reforms.

It is disturbing that the main stream media is so willing to give platforms to people who either do not understand Catholicism or who have a grudge against the Church. Also disturbing to see secular notions about popular movements and the role of women in society equated with a condemnation of the way things are done in the Church, as if we are to overthrow our tradition, a tradition that is normative after all, because of sociological changes in the West. The Church does change, of course. But, the fact that the Church changes slowly is not a bad thing. If a government adopts a policy with unintended consequences ? and there are always unintended consequences ? the policy can be changed or rescinded if the consequences are worse than the desired objective. But the doctrines and traditions of the Church should not be so easily overturned. Souls are at stake, after all.

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