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Independence Is A State of Mind

Ken Briggs | Jul. 4, 2013 NCR Today

A fellow non Catholic had heard about the alleged though plainly documented charge that the cardinal archbishop of New York had won Vatican permission to hide $57 million to keep it out of the hands of victims of priest child abuse who would be eligible for legal compensation. Noting that this kind of money shuffling (perhaps illegal) sounded to him a little like Apple Computer scheming to avoid paying taxes, he wonder whether it was any more likely than any of a long string of scandals to cause American Catholics to revolt.

It's an Independence Day sort of question. In the Declaration, the fired up patriots had had enough of double dealing and callous disregard of common decency by King George III and said so brazenly.Though many colonists remained fiercely orthodox in their allegiance to the British crown,the combination of passion fired by Thomas Paine pamphlets, among other prods, and a visceral desire to run their own businesses eventually overcame status quo protest..

My response, for better or worse, was that the tensions in the church reflected the opposite: the colony, U.S. Catholicism, had gone their own way without having to do more than raise an occasional fuss. Catholics may feel their their faith based institution is demeaned by spectacles such as the Dolan reports. It would deeply disturb many that while in Milwaukee Dolan appears to have obstructed justice even while he now vows to press moral causes of the bishops such as their effort to thwart the Obama Administration's insistence that Catholic institutions provide contraception services to employees who want them, at no cost to the church. It was earlier revealed that Dolan's archdiocese has been supplying such services under a similar agreement with New York unions for many years. The bluster of prideful righteousness in the face of hard evidence continues a grim pattern of hierarchical behavior, scoffing at accusers instead of admitting wrong.

Despite continuing blows against the church's reputation, and much personal disillusionment, nowhere do Catholics in this country show the least inclination to assemble the fife and drum corps in the cause of breaking from Rome. They don't have to, I theorized to my friend, because they already have. While they may feel a growing anger at the church in the wake of painful assaults on the image of the Catholic church, they have nothing to gain by marching away, though many have quit the church. Though millions of laity care deeply about the round of moral and theological questions from birth control to the ordination of women, the bond of compliance has been largely broken and they have silently declared independence from their bishops. The moral and mental landscape has shifted toward a position where the old rewards and punishments no longer mean much.

This quiet revolution strikes me as profoundly Catholic because it issues from the Second Vatican Council which seeped into the bloodstream of American Catholics even as it was been countered by many of its bishops and a couple of popes. You could say that a inchoate declaration has emerged as Catholics came to believe that the promises of Vatican II were not being kept. Here may be the lone parallel to the signers of the Declaration whose point was that the king had failed to abide by rights they believe inhered in British law. And, of course, the "no taxation without representation" charge finds a modest voice among U.S. Catholics who believe that the laity's total exclusion from church leadership is unjust.

For most American Catholics, I ventured to say to my friend, the cost of following one's own conscience, of wincing at cover up and hypocrisy, isn't enough to do anything about. Something close to reaction swelled up after the Vatican launched its investigation of nuns, but for most it is heartfelt and dismaying but not worth taking to the streets for. For Catholics in this nation have struck a bargain: they will remain at least nominally Catholic because there are no sanctions that would interfere with their pursuit of American ideals. For the moment, a kinder, gentler, more American style personality occupies the chair of St. Peter and he may stanch the exit from the American church. If he does anything concrete to make the church's doctrine and practice more agreeable to American Catholics, so much the better. But they will never again be drawn into the kinds of solidarity that risks rebellion.

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