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Are pat downs next for church volunteers?

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Dec. 2, 2010 Bulletins from the Human Side

If you think it is hard to get on an airplane without being hassled and/or humiliated, try volunteering for parish work in the diocese of Venice, Florida.

You may remember Bishop Frank DeWane of the diocese, who shared this year?s clericalism prize for, among other things, decreeing that no women could participate in any liturgy at which he would preside. If you like that decree -- or enjoy the TSA frisking at airports -- you will love the full soul scans that he insists on before Catholics are allowed to volunteer for various church ministries.

These may be found in many dioceses, but the bishop -- who will not wash women?s feet on Holy Thursday -- adds a certain frisson to their promulgation in Venice. It?s a shiver that comes from wondering what gratification he derives from assuming a suspicious stance towards Catholics who only want to comfort the sick and console the sorrowing.

Jesus made it simple. He just said, ?Come, follow me.? He didn?t say, ?Come follow me but get finger-printed first.? Jesus relied on what he saw of the goodness in the men He called to be apostles. He did not have anybody screen the men and women who became his followers for weapons or for their life histories.

Jesus was as comfortable with men and women of all kinds, especially sinners, as Bishop Dewane appears to be uncomfortable with any man or woman who wants to follow Jesus now. It seems odd to be, in effect, against the practice of Christian charity -- the note by which Jesus said people would recognize his disciples.

First, the person must fill out the DIOCESE OF VENICE VOLUNTEER APPLICATION that, along with other intrusive boilerplate, wants to know if you have been screened by DOV (Diocese of Venice) within the last seven years. It gets good when, like a suspicious e-mail promising you a million dollars if you send your personal information to a bank in Kenya, it demands your driver?s license number and a copy of your insurance card.

And, oh, yes, if you drive a ?van designed to seat 16 persons or transporting children,? there?s an app for that. In this case, the DOV Transportation Manual.

We?ll get to the ?Attestation of Good Moral Character and fingerprint card? in a moment, but first you must authorize ?the Diocese of Venice and/or Premier InfoSource to investigate my background, including criminal and driving history and hereby release said information to them.?

Then you must release DOV and Premier Info/Source, ?from all liability arising from the investigation or disclosure of the requested information as well as those companies, officials, officers and other persons, who in good faith provide the information to the DOV/Premier/InfoSource.?

Now you might just want to know a little more about Premier/InfoSource that seems to be free to do what it wants with your confidential information. Maybe they supply those shady operators in Kenya and other places

with addresses from sunny Florida. Are they and DOV promising, as legitimate groups do, not to sell your address to other parties? Who are these people anyway?

The ?attestation of good moral character? demands -- and I am not making this up -- that you ?attest, under penalty of perjury, that I am of good moral character... And that I have not committed, nor [sic] been found guilty of, regardless of adjudication, or entered a plea of nolo contendere or guilty to, any offense (or attempt or conspiracy thereunder) prohibited under any of the following provisions of the Florida statutes ... or under any similar statute of another jurisdiction.?

There follows a list of 33 crimes, including: ?adult abuse, neglect, or exploitation of aged persons or disabled adults, murder, manslaughter, vehicular homicide, assault, battery, and kidnapping, exhibiting firearms within 1000 feet of a school or possessing an electric weapon or device, prostitution, lewd and lascivious behavior, arson, burglary, fraudulent sale of controlled substances, incest, resisting arrest,? and ?aiding in the escape of juvenile inmates ...?

Imagine the hopeful volunteers who are required to fill this out and promise to inform the diocese, DOV, that is, if they ever commit any of these acts, then get themselves finger printed and submit all of this for approval. At least half of these Catholics belong to Tom Brokaw?s greatest generation as veterans of World War II. They are religiously well informed, share a deep commitment to their faith and their families, and there are no outstanding warrants on any of them.

In short, these are the People of God, as the church understands theologically, and the backbone and foundation of American Catholicism. And Dewane wants them to prove their goodness to him before they can minister to the needy!

These procedures, originating from the bad legal advice given to bishops after the first revelation of the sex abuse scandal in 2002, are now being inappropriately applied to the laity. Sex abuse victims were not abused by the laity, but by priests and other church personnel, as in the Venice diocese, who, in this charade of justice, are to be held free of liability in connection with any of these scandalous investigations.

Dewane?s fingerprints may not be on file but they are all over this assault on the good Catholics who, despite such harassment, still go to church and do good for others. The essence of sexual abuse is found in someone who has power using it over someone who does not in order to gain gratification from the consequent demeaning and humiliation of the other.

Ironically and sadly, this protocol will not only fail to stop sex abusers who are masters of manipulation and gaming any system that tries to contain them, but it also shreds the concepts of charity and trust that are essential notes of a true Christian community.

I am willing to attest, give my finger prints as well, to the charge that these procedures constitute, in their demeaning and humiliating of good people, as reasonable a facsimile as you will get of sexual abuse. While making victims of the innocent, they also re-enact the common element of clergy sex abuse -- wresting from victims a promise (?hold free of liability?) not to say anything about their victimizers or what they did to them.

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