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Set-decorator Catholicism: clericalism thrives in a new phase of the sex abuse crisis

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jun. 30, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

Part One of Two

Decoration: (2) That which decorates or adorns, an ornament, esp. an ornament temporarily put up on a special location; used ... of scenery on the stage.
-- *Oxford English Dictionary*

Set-decorator: The person responsible for dressing a motion picture set with appropriate decorative furnishings -- furniture, rugs, lamps, draperies, wall paintings, books, etc.
-- *The Film Encyclopedia, Third Edition*

Chicago, November 1986: One final scene remains to be filmed as director Brian DePalma's version of "The Untouchables" wraps its location shooting just before Thanksgiving. Robert DeNiro, starring as Al Capone, waits impassively to walk down the main stairway of the Lexington Hotel, the gangster's Chicago headquarters during the Prohibition beer wars. The Lexington's lobby, including a putting green for the amusement of his gang, has been meticulously re-created by the celebrated production designer Patrizia Von Brandenstein in the soaring entrance hall of Roosevelt University, a massive Buddha of a building designed by Louis Sullivan almost a century before. Outside in the pale November sunlight, vintage cars line Michigan Avenue and twine tied bundles of facsimile newspapers lay on the sidewalk as if tossed off a delivery truck that has just turned the corner and disappeared back into the Depression.

This satisfies DePalma's artistic demand for accurate period detail as well as DeNiro's acting ground rules that no hints of present reality violate his "sight lines" and break his time-warp spell of inhabiting both razzmatazz Chicago and Al Capone at the same time. Visitors are ordered to leave the set or to hide behind the furniture so that DeNiro descending will see only a trompe-l'oeil of the lost and gone hotel. After DeNiro swaggers down the stairs and DePalma yells cut, the spinning top of movie illusion that has been shimmying like a Twenties dancer, wobbles and tumbles to rest ...

Vatican II Deniers in American Catholicism

American Catholicism should be preparing for 2020 when a large increase in the Catholic population, mostly Hispanic, will present Church leaders with the challenge to open rather than close new churches and schools. Instead of preparing for the future, bishops and priests now in key administrative and pastoral positions, led by Pope Benedict XVI, are dressing the set of Catholic life with props from the past in an effort to take the church back to 1920.

That era of simplistically captioned silent movies is now re-created through the awkwardly translated liturgical readings soon to be expensively imposed on what these self-styled "reformers" hope to be passive and silent parishioners. Americans are not, however, alone in experiencing this phenomenon. In May the bishops of

England and Wales restored meatless Fridays year round for Catholics. In the same month a nun held up a silver reliquary carrying the blood of the newly beatified Pope John Paul II, to applause by a large crowd in St. Peter's Square. Besides alerting Pope Benedict to beware of doctors holding syringes, this reveals the Transylvanian caste of some of the clerics now decorating the set of Catholicism throughout the world.

As demanding and sometimes as narcissistic as great actors, these set-dresser clerics are tantrum ready if they pick up any symbol or practice of Vatican II in their sight lines. While the makers of "The Untouchables" knew that they had emptied a warehouse of dusty props to create a temporary illusion of Prohibition era Chicago, these "New Men," as they sometimes style themselves, believe that placing pre-Vatican II artifacts everywhere in contemporary Catholicism actually restores the high times of the hierarchical Church.

Clericalism redux energizes this spreading movement to reinstate that Neverland age of Catholicism when priests controlled the church, lay people knew their place, the Mass was in Latin, God was in His heaven and all was right with the world.

All they need are church parking lots filled with Twenties era Pierce-Arrows and Model T's to match the retro-fitted customs, such as recruiting people to keep vigil with a supposedly lonely Jesus in overnight adoration of the Blessed Sacrament

The examined life is not, however, the focus of set-decorators who promote an unexamined return to Flapper-era Faith. Nothing better symbolizes these efforts than their fussy revival of that liturgical species once thought extinct, the Solemn High Mass that keeps lay people well away from the altar as, by deploying a deacon and sub-deacon to assist the priest celebrant, reinforces the concept of the hierarchically layered priesthood and church. In short, the church before, as one set-decorator said in my hearing, the "morally evil" Vatican II occurred.

Through this movement, clericalism, whose exclusive country club culture has finally been identified as one of the breeding grounds and hiding places for priest sex abusers, has vaulted back onto center stage or, better, the center sanctuary of ecclesiastical life. These new zealots assault Vatican II's formal collegial theology of the church as a People and Catholicism's informal sense of itself as a big family.

I recently witnessed a set-decorator priest just in from bureaucratic duty in Rome as a first-time pastor. Moving swiftly to deconstruct the Vatican II parish that he apparently now viewed as his property, he dismissed the extraordinary eucharistic ministers, claiming that only a priest or deacon is permitted by canon law to take the Eucharist to the sick. He also ended the practice of receiving the Eucharist under both species, claiming that the chalices needed "re-plating." They have not been seen since. He then preached something that everybody in the church already knew, that they receive the Body and Blood of the Lord even if they only receive the host. His real objective, of course, was to remove from his sight lines a practice that he identified as a bad outcome of Vatican II.

Angle of Repose

Set-decorators settle into what novelist Wallace Stegner called an "angle of repose" that defines the way they perceive themselves and the people around them. These clergymen look up to their superiors and down on their people whom they judge to be in need of rehabilitation or conversion. They want to de-program their people of their memories of Vatican II and purge their churches of any influence of that council by constantly correcting and re-educating their flocks in a strict constructionist interpretation of basic Catholic beliefs and practices. One new pastor of this old stripe introduced himself to his people in his first sermon as the herald "sent to make Catholics out of you."

I made notes as a quintessential set-decorator rambled through a Corpus Christi sermon, haranguing the parishioners about something they knew to be untrue: "You do not fulfill your Sunday obligation if you arrive

after the Gospel or leave before the priest gives his last blessing. Remember what happened to the one who left the Last Supper early."

He then launched an attack as amazing as it was revealing, "We've been through an era where anything is good enough for Jesus so I want to remind you of some things. In the Eucharist Jesus is the bridegroom and you are members of the bride so that receiving the Eucharist is that moment at which the bridegroom and the bride complete their union. As members of the bride, how do you prepare? How do you dress? Do you arrive on time? Do you keep the fast? Do you chew gum? Do you take mints? Avoid these as penance for your sins."

"Reverence over Preference every time ..."

"I want to remind you," he continued, "that it is a moral evil for non-Catholics to receive Communion. Don't violate their consciences by inviting them. Who can go to Communion? Baptized Catholics who have made their First Communion and who are in a state of grace. And the preferred way to receive Communion is on the tongue. Studies show that this is not only theologically correct but the most efficient way to receive. Receiving Communion in the hand is permitted only by a papal indult that the Holy Father could change at any time.

"You should bow when the person ahead of you bows. That is the fastest, most efficient way to do it. Bowing at the right time and receiving Communion on the tongue follows the principle of 'Reverence over Preference every time.'" He added more remarkable Mass etiquette, "You should only give the kiss of peace to the person next to you, not to anybody else and no moving around the church to give it to others."

He returned breathily to his extraordinary metaphor of the marital bed for receiving the Eucharist, "Communion defines who you are as spouses. The bridegroom has given himself to the bride. The priest receives first as the bridegroom in fulfillment of the wedding promises. So the bridegroom is within you. The priest then blesses the bride in the name of the Holy Trinity."

Parishioners gazed around uneasily, does he really mean that, does he know what he's saying? Yes to the first, No to the second, but he had already shifted subjects. "You should not hold hands," he commanded, "during the Our Father because the priest has his hands separated at the time and because the Our Father isn't about us." He gazed down dismissively, "You can hold hands any time outside church."

The parishioners handled all this as healthy experienced Catholics always do, letting the rant run its course and, when the moment arrived, passing the kiss of peace to everybody within reach. Set-decorators do not realize the danger in condescending to men and women whose maturity and theological sophistication regularly equal and many times surpass their own.

The New Virtual Phase of the Sex Abuse Crisis

Set-decorators know more about their props than they do about their people or themselves. They experience the unconscious rewards that arise from demeaning and humiliating other people. Hidden even to them is the primitive component depicted in a stark scene in David Lean's celebrated movie, "Lawrence of Arabia." Lawrence is subjected to a lashing in the presence of a military official whose slightly twitching cheek muscle is the only signal of the inner gratification he takes in this spectacle devised by and staged only for him. These clerics do not admit, much less try to identify, the rewards they pick up from putting other people down. That they seal these feelings off so that they do not attend to them does not lessen the impact of their behavior on their people. It is not difficult to observe the intensity and self-righteousness with which they claim to be correct in all matters or the unforgiving and exaggerated tone of their condemnations. You can sense the disparity between the smallness of the proposed infraction, "You miss Mass by leaving before the priest does," and the sarcastic severity of the condemnation, "Remember what happened to the one who left the Last Supper early."

Other signals include making claims, usually invoking non-existent "documents," that contradict accepted theology, such as insisting that Catholicism is based on the crucifixion rather than the resurrection in tones that belittle even the possibility of raising a question. It is instructive to note how many of their interventions in parish life, as in dismissing Parish Councils, represent the triumph of one man over another man or group of men. These include, of course, the taken-for-granted denigration of women and goes along with their overall sense of superiority to others expressed in the piously masked aspects of their put you down at all costs style that rewards them at unconscious levels of their personalities.

We Have Power and You Do Not ...

One can also observe the exaggerated, not to say operatic, gestures that these supercilious clergy employ in celebrating Mass. Descending beneath the altar for several seconds before elevating the Host, for example, is one of their embarrassingly histrionic ways of making themselves rather than the sacrament the center of attention, *Look at me, I am the celebrant here*. Members of the congregation are not so much swept up in this faux piety as they are put off by its studied, staged, and ready-for-my-close-up character. In all these attitudes and gestures, set-decorators telegraph their overarching, sexually triumphant message: *We have power and you do not and we enjoy using it over you*.

This patronizing style recapitulates the symbolic dynamics of the Sex Abuse Crisis in which clerics with power use it over those without power in order to satisfy immature and unresolved needs within themselves. Set-dresser clerics are the agents of a new, more subtle if no less perverse phase of the Sex Abuse Crisis.

Set-decorating provides these priests with a justifying vehicle for their triumphalist style and a pious filter through which they express their own uncertain personal development. The elaborate re-creation of the surfaces and practices of a by-gone age provides a massive and complex defense for the manipulation of the spiritual and psychological lives of others by clerics who either do not understand or cannot admit the secret agenda beneath their unhealthy exercise of power over their people.

Sex abuse occurs whenever one person uses others, debasing them for motives that are hidden or disguised from one or both and that are seasoned with low-level gratifications. This can be done overtly through direct physical abuse, or covertly through the psychological abuse of other persons. This small but insidious fraction of the clergy thereby reveal a need to punish what is healthy in others in order to reward what is unhealthy in themselves. That is virtual sex abuse, impure, un-simple, and undeniable.

Abused by the Hierarchical Model

This tragic signature of sex abuse may be observed in the reactions of good Catholics whose feelings of being treated like children are the same as those of the children victims of the first phase of the Sex Abuse Crisis. The set-decorator clerics who extend the sex abuse crisis in their demeaning treatment of their parishioners are not, however, monsters but men who deserve more understanding than condemnation. They are themselves victims of the hierarchical system that drew them in with its appeal to their romantic pre-adolescent idealism. The hierarchical model fixated them at that level by rewarding them for passively accepting its growth-inhibiting discipline. The healthiest of men pay a price for the unqualified loyalty that living by the rules and customs of hierarchy demands of them. Men who are not fully grown when they enter the hierarchical system are flash frozen in psychological place by its inter-related demands and rewards. Such candidates are, we might say, abused by their long, slow years of socialization into hierarchy's clerical ranks.

While some may glory in its patriarchal ethos, the majority of America's bishops are fundamentally healthy men who sacrifice more of themselves than we might suspect to meet the expectations made on them to maintain the hierarchical model of the church. Under siege from all sides, it is hardly surprising that they accept seminary

candidates whose superficial strengths appeal to them and whose unfinished internal growth is either not immediately apparent or is written off at steep discount. Bishops who may be consciously committed to a hierarchical mode that challenges their strengths accept candidates who are unconsciously attracted to a hierarchical mode that meets their needs. From the latter ranks arise the present generation of set-decorator clerics. In what they call a time of vocational crisis, the bishops settle for these psychologically under-developed men for the same reason people climb mountains: they are there, in place, untroubled by celibacy, un-dissenting with the church's teachings on sexuality, and, suppose their style is a little fey, keeping the store open in hard times.

Such men yearn to complete their own growth but they are severely limited in their psychological ability to do so. They tell us their unhappy stories in their efforts to return to the past, to resurrect and re-live their own childhoods, making up for what was missing in their own mothering by finding it from the Virgin who seemed to reign so sweetly and smoothly in a thousand novenas, family rosaries, and May crownings in that Proustian projection of a time lost that they are struggling to regain. A church, however, does not exist solely to make up for the emotional deficits of its clergy. Nor can it take on the challenges of the 21st century by returning by way of magical thinking to the imagined set-decorator dominated nirvana of the early 20th century.

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

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