

July 27, 2007 - Church would benefit from better bishop selections

The Rev. Andrew Greeley Columnist, The Daily Southtown (IL)

"How can the Pope say that the other denominations are defective when American Catholicism had to pay \$2 billion because of predator priests?" -- From an angry e-mail writer

Good question.

The media did not accurately convey what the Vatican was trying to say. Like everyone else in the curia, the media relations people simply do not make mistakes. Got it?

If American Catholics are embarrassed by these non-mistakes, the reasons are weak faith, secularism, materialism, consumerism, etc.

However, there is an aspect of the contretemps that is worth noting. One of the weaknesses of the other denominations, the Pope observes, is that they don't have apostolic succession -- they can't trace their leaders back to the apostles.

This continuity with the past indeed is important to Catholicism. Many bishops are proud of the link. I often wonder, however, if they realize with what kind of men they are claiming continuity?

On the basis of the New Testament, they were braggarts, liars, careerists, thieves, cowards, conspirators, traitors and incompetents. They did improve with time, and they did pass on the teachings of Jesus (which, I take it, is the Pope's point), and they did die for their convictions. But they were not the kind of men you or I would choose if we were starting a church. One could argue there hasn't been all that much improvement since then.

Catholics do not believe in their bishops or priests. They believe in God, of whom the church is a sacrament. However, they do claim a right to intelligent, sensitive, competent and user-friendly clergy. Even these days, two millennia out of Jerusalem, there are not nearly enough of those around.

The sex abuse crisis became common knowledge in the late 1980s. It took more than a decade for the bishops to respond in 2002 with a protocol of "zero tolerance." Many bishops were less than enthused by the requirements and restrictions the protocol imposed on them. In some dioceses, bitter fights over legal responsibilities continue even to the present.

It is not clear that chancery staffs are ready to be harsh on fellow priests. Priests in parishes sometimes still make excuses for their colleagues. On the whole, however, bishops began to understand the depth of the problem, if only because of the huge financial losses.

The collective hierarchy has not covered itself with glory and honor in this crises. Cardinal Egan in New York has told his priests that one phone call against a priest means he's soiled goods. The propensity to stonewall and cover up is still strong. The last pope, for example, backed his friend (the Rev.) Marcial Maciel, the founder of the Legion of Christ, despite evidence of sex abuse, which would have led to a conviction in an American court. The present pope, however, has suspended Maciel from public ministry.

It is difficult to understand how the hierarchy made such a mess of the abuse crisis. It is even more difficult to understand how some of them have made the scandal even worse.

Successors to the apostles? Surely, but not the kind of men, with some exceptions, who make the church more of a light on the mountain top. Nor do they seem capable of learning from their mistakes.

One has to conclude that the method of choosing bishops leaves much to be desired. The laity do not expect saints, but it is reasonable of them to expect competent, intelligent and sensitive men. Until more such men don the sacred purple, the church's image in this country will continue to deteriorate.

An occasional saint wouldn't hurt.

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