

Debate of church rite is a matter of context

Tim Rutten writes about the media for the Los Angeles Times

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The great Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray, whose 20th-century reflections on religion and American democracy still are without equal, once wrote that "the law must countenance many evils that morality forbids."

If that sort of nuanced religious thinking seems somehow novel, it isn't because it's absent from contemporary Catholicism's moral reasoning. It is, however, ignored in most of the mainstream American news media's coverage of the church.

A perfect case in point is the way much of the media has handled the continuing faux-controversy over whether Roman Catholic office-holders who have cast pro-choice votes - notably Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kerry and Gov. McGreevey - ought to be denied communion by their clergy.

One of the most important things missing is context. The church's American hierarchy did not initiate a confrontation over this matter. Rather, a handful of relatively obscure and reckless prelates - just four out of the nation's 300 Catholic bishops - have walked into a controversy fueled by political partisans tied to the Republican Party.

The sequence of events began late last month in Rome, when Cardinal Francis Arinze, the prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, held a news conference to announce the clarification of certain liturgical practices involving communion. Pretty intramural stuff.

In the question-and-answer session that followed, a couple of correspondents for conservative U.S. news organizations repeatedly badgered the Nigerian cardinal about whether U.S. politicians who cast votes in favor of abortion rights should be allowed to receive the sacrament. A weary Arinze finally said that there is a Catholic Church in the United States, it has bishops, and that the issue was theirs to deal with pastorally.

That gave the American right the opening it had been looking for.

Soon thereafter, Bishop Michael J. Sheridan of Colorado Springs, Colo., issued a pastoral letter insisting that communion should be denied office-holders who favor abortion rights, stem-cell research, euthanasia and same-sex marriage - and to anybody who votes for them.

The media, and particularly cable news networks, love the bishop-vs.-politician story. After all, it has both the elements U.S. journalists like to see in a story about the Catholic Church.

All but buried are the quiet voices of other, far more experienced and influential prelates. Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, for example, said there would be no denial of

communion in his archdiocese. Last week, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington wrote in his archdiocesan newspaper that he, too, opposed withholding the sacrament. Moreover, he pointed out that during a recent visit to the Vatican "it was clear that so many of the highest authorities in the church are in agreement with my position."

Given the media's sudden preoccupation with Vatican pronouncements, how is it that if you want to read the most important story out of Rome last week, you have to go to a paper published in London?

On the front page of last weekend's edition of the Tablet, England's oldest Catholic newspaper, there is this: "The American President, George W. Bush, will be asked by the Pope at their Vatican meeting on 4 June to stop basing his policies in the Middle East on the use of force." According to Cardinal Pio Laghi, former papal nuncio to the United States and a frequent messenger between the Vatican and White House, the Pope wants a multilateral peacekeeping force in Iraq, "one that is not under those who organized the war."

According to the cardinal, the Pope intends to remind Bush that "the end never justifies the means, respect for life must always be honored, and that struggle against terrorism does not justify giving up the principles of the state of law."

Why a letter from an obscure Colorado bishop somehow trumps the admonitions of Pope John Paul II as a campaign issue as a newsworthy item is something on which editors and producers might wish to reflect.