

WHY DID VATICAN OFFICIALS SACK JESUIT EDITOR?

BECAUSE THEY COULD

By

Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Many observers are puzzled that the Vatican should force the mild and moderate Jesuit Father Thomas Reese to resign as editor of AMERICA, one of the nation's oldest and most respected Catholic magazines.

Father Reese is not a theologian but a political scientist and he and his associate editors have offered admirably balanced discussions of the great issues of interest not only to Catholics but to all persons concerned about the moral issues of our age.

That, of course, is what made Father Reese the perfect target for an intervention aimed less at him individually than at theologically sophisticated Catholics collectively.

As Bill Clinton explained that he did some things "because I could," Vatican officials singled out Father Reese because they could. They had the power to strike the vulnerable Father Reese and so fire a warning shot across the ranks of millions of Catholics over whom Vatican officials cannot successfully exercise power, much less their institutional authority, with any success at all.

In short, for Vatican purposes, it was expedient that one prominent Catholic figure should die for their cause which is to try to get their bureaucratic control back over as much of the Church as possible.

Father Reese was a target of opportunity because he is a Jesuit and members of that legendary order bind themselves with an additional promise of obedience to the Pope that guaranteed that any orders given to him would be carried out without hesitation. Father Reese did not hold a university professorship so that Vatican officials could strike him down without involving themselves in the unpredictable complications of academic freedom, tenure, and independence.

There could, therefore, be no protracted public dramatization of the possible injustices involved as there was when the Vatican removed moral theologian Charles E. Curran from the Catholic University of America a generation ago. The advantage to the Vatican officials is that this message will be heard by all theologians even though direct action cannot be taken against them.

The message could not be more clear if it had been sent by FedEx to such lay groups as the Voice of the Faithful and Future Church who now have chapters of

Catholics aware of their religious heritage throughout the country. Bureaucrats long to get such groups under their control because their members operate independently of any institutional connection and understand the simplest of Christian truths: They do not need permission from either the Pope or their bishop to believe or to do good.

American Catholicism has been a great success and, through its educational system has now produced millions of adult Catholics who know as much if not more theology than Roman bureaucrats or their own bishops. They understand that they, rather than the prelates or the palaces, are the Church, and since they are not clerics dependent on the institution for their livelihoods, they cannot be threatened or disciplined successfully. Father Reese had to die symbolically in order to make Roman officials feel that they are in charge of all Catholic conversation.

They reveal that they do not understand one of their greatest challenges – to learn how to dialogue maturely and respectfully with theologically informed American Catholics. They also do not understand that a number of issues, particularly those touching on sex and gender issues, are considered theologically “open” questions and that people of good will can explore them without violating Church regulation or incurring penalties.

Worse still, they do not seem to recognize the age old teaching of the Church that nothing can be considered a Church teaching if it is not received by the Catholic people. This doctrine of Reception is considered one of the traditional “gifts” of the Church. The Catholic people, therefore, play a major role in evaluating the validity of the content of such disciplinary matters as celibacy and the denial of priesthood to women.

In 1909, the Vatican suppressed the New York Review, the first Catholic theological journal in America, and sacked its editor, New York priest Father James Driscoll, opening a dark night on Catholic intellectual life that did not lift until the Jesuits established Theological Studies in 1940. These have not, however, been 100 years of solitude for American Catholics who have regained their appetite for theological knowledge and their conviction that the Church is not an army on the march but a People on pilgrimage through history.

Vatican officials have succeeded in a small way because they could make Father Reese submit humbly. They have failed in a larger way by exercising power in a way that destroys their claims to real authority over Catholics who cannot be bullied by threats and who will not surrender their deep understanding that they are the Church.