

Priest Calls on Pope to Lift Celibacy Requirement

What follows is an interview with 69-year-old priest, Donald Cozzens, who was questioned by Nicole Neroulias, of Religion News Service. Some of the answers have been edited.

Q: What do you see as the reason for the decline in American men wanting to become priests?

A: The clergy sexual abuse scandals have taken their toll, but my hunch is that the typical size of the Catholic family is a major factor. Catholics on average are having about two children. And so, the replacement rate in the United States today -- for every 100 priests who either retire or die or leave ministry -- we're ordaining, I believe, less than 35.

Q: But you also argue that mandating celibacy for priests is a significant part of this problem?

A: I think celibacy is a great gift, and it's wonderful for people who have the grace and the gift and the calling, but it can be a very difficult situation for men who feel called to the priesthood but not to celibacy. Over the past half dozen years, I've asked probably two dozen men if they've ever thought of being priests, and every one of them has said yes, they have thought of it, but then they add, "I really feel also called to the sacrament of marriage, I'd like to be a husband and a father."

Q: When did you start thinking mandatory celibacy should be reconsidered?

A: The first time I thought about the priesthood, from my grade school days, I felt called to be a priest, and the issue of mandatory celibacy was a disquieting condition of the priesthood. But I didn't seriously look at the history of celibacy and its theology until after I was ordained. We've always (historically) had a married priesthood in the Catholic Church. It really wasn't until the 12th century that celibacy was made mandatory for diocesan priests, and some historians argue that it really wasn't taken seriously until the 16th century.

Q: Given that there are some married clergy now in the Eastern rite churches or who have converted to Catholicism, what's stopping the Vatican from deciding to allow married priests in general?

A: That's a good question! Celibacy is a church policy; it is not a church dogma. Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI, they have the freedom to change that policy at any time they feel it would be prudent to do so. There are a number of bishops' conferences [which] have called upon the Vatican to reflect and discuss the issue of celibacy and whether or not is it wise to legislate celibacy for every person who feels called to the priesthood.

Q: Will this policy change within your lifetime?

A: We need to provide the Eucharist to Catholic people, and if the trend continues -- and I think it would be naive to think it's going to turn around soon -- I think the demographic situation might bring about a change in this policy. But, we'd have to hit a critical pastoral need and we'd need leadership from the U.S. bishops and we'd also need the laity

and the clergy to say, "Let's examine this policy. Is it really necessary and good for the church?"

Q: What about other strategies for boosting seminary enrollment? For example, do you think the pope's visit might inspire more men to consider the priesthood?

A: I wouldn't be surprised if there was an increase in the number of men applying to our seminaries, but I don't believe it will be significant enough to meet the challenges that the U.S. Catholic church will be facing, in terms of the number of ordained priests available for ministry.

Q: Is the priest shortage predominantly an American problem?

A: It's a Western problem. We see similar situations, if not worse, in countries of western Europe, and to some extent in eastern Europe. Where we see a different phenomenon would be in developing countries, especially in some of the countries of Africa. Perhaps 30 percent of the priests being ordained in the United States are from foreign countries.

Q: If the Vatican decides priests don't have to be celibate anymore, would you get married?

A: Not at my age! I think it's possible to grow into the gift of celibacy. I would have to discern whether or not I was being called to marriage just as I had to discern whether I was being called to the priesthood. I have no idea how many priests would get married. The average age of a priest today is over 60 and marriage is quite a commitment and quite an adjustment. But I do think we'd have more seminarians, if celibacy were optional.

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Doesn't take us long to catch on!

In Premier See, Legion Gets Premier Scrutiny

Culminating years of concerns over the work of the Legionaries of Christ in the nation's oldest diocese, Archbishop Edwin O'Brien of Baltimore has placed the movement's twin organs under a heightened level of oversight.

After meeting with the Legion's superior-general last Friday, O'Brien sent letters to his priests and the LC head, Fr Álvaro Corcuera Martinez del Rio, detailing the new policy, which was formulated after consultations both with the archdiocese's presbyteral council and the Holy See.

'I need the following from you,' O'Brien wrote Corcuera, noting along the way that the 'willingness to accept the discernment of ecclesiastical authority is but a further proof of the authenticity of the charisms of the Legion and its lay arm, *Regnum Christi*.'

By the end of this week, Corcuera was asked to name a priest to serve as liaison between the communities and the archbishop's office, subject to approval by O'Brien. By 30 June, the liaison is required to provide coordinates for every Legion priest serving in the 525,000-member archdiocese; detailed information on every *Regnum Christi* branch

within its boundaries, including 'activities, meeting locations and schedules, membership rolls and methodologies for gaining new members'; each RC youth program operating in Baltimore, and a full disclosure of every other LC/RC apostolate active in the archdiocese. By the same date, each pastor whose parish has one of the groups' works on its territory is to receive a 'full written' briefing on their activities there.

Given long-standing criticism from some quarters of the Legion's recruitment methods, the most significant part of the new norms deals with the movement's outreach to the young.

'I want to ensure that encouragement of vocations is carried out in a way that respects the rights of parents in the upbringing of their children and the rights of young persons themselves to be able to make free and fully informed decisions about their futures,' O'Brien wrote.

Per the archbishop's order, 'to avoid any undue sense of vocational obligation,' the LC is forbidden to conduct 'ongoing, individual' spiritual direction with a minor. The group is likewise to disclose to the archdiocese the names of all under-18 participants in its summer programs, and all attendees of its high school seminaries or boarding schools.

The letter closed with a request for the groups to keep the archbishop informed of their 'long- and short-range planning goals and objectives' for their Baltimore apostolates on a six-monthly basis. 'I know of the deep commitment of the Legion and Regnum Christi to carry out their mission and exercise their charisms in support of the unity and communion that Christ wants for his Church,' he wrote. ...

SURPRISE!!! Could see this coming from a mile away.

Pope would like Tridentine Mass in each parish, Vatican official says

LONDON (CNS) -- Pope Benedict XVI would like every Catholic parish in the world to celebrate a regular Tridentine-rite Mass, a Vatican cardinal has said. Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos also told a June 14 press conference in London that the Vatican was writing to all seminaries to ask that candidates to the priesthood are trained to celebrate Mass according to the extraordinary form of the Latin rite, also known as the Tridentine Mass, restricted from the 1970s until July 2007 when Pope Benedict lifted some of those limits.

The cardinal, who was visiting London at the invitation of the Latin Mass Society, a British Catholic group committed to promoting Mass in the Tridentine rite of the 1962 Roman Missal, said it was 'absolute ignorance' to think that the pope was trying to reverse the reforms of the Second Vatican Council by encouraging use of the rite. Later in the day, Cardinal Castrillon celebrated the first pontifical high Mass in the Tridentine rite in London's Westminster Cathedral in 39 years. The event drew a congregation of

more than 1,500 people, including young families. None of the English or Welsh bishops attended.

When I was a child, there were some priests who would boast of their ability to “say” a Latin mass in eleven minutes. To claim that a reverently celebrated vernacular mass is in any way comparable to an eleven minute mass in Latin is absurd. Each liturgy is prone to abuse.

However, the vernacular liturgy *can* be both reverent and *understandable*. What a concept!

Grateful to *Commonweal*. However, isn't it unfortunate that an article like this still has to be written?

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Why Catholics Don't Have to Vote Republican

Gerald J. Beyer

Republicans often use overheated and oversimplified rhetoric regarding the affinity between Catholic teaching and their platform. As a result, many people mistakenly assume that a Catholic must vote Republican. David Carlin, former Democratic Rhode Island senator, seems to have fallen prey to this fallacy ('Two Cheers for John McCain,' *Commonweal*, May 9).

Like many other well-meaning Catholics, Carlin argues that 'there is no logical way to vote for the presidential candidate of a party committed to the preservation and extension of abortion rights.' He maligns 'Catholic in name only' types who resort to intellectual chicanery to justify voting for candidates who support 'the slaughter of innocents.' In this context, it is interesting to ponder why so many distinguished Catholic public servants, activists, and theologians have endorsed Barack Obama, a Democrat, for the presidency.

As an institution, the Roman Catholic Church does not tell believers for whom or against whom they must vote, despite what some politicians, pundits, and pastors suggest. Rather, as the U.S. bishops write in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (2007), 'the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience.' Certainly Catholics must seriously consider any candidate's stance on 'intrinsic evils' such as abortion, racism, and torture. Catholics may not vote for a candidate who supports an intrinsic evil 'if the voter's intent is to support that position.' Yet Catholics may choose a candidate who does not unequivocally condemn an intrinsic evil for other 'truly grave moral reasons.' Catholics ought to choose the candidate who is least likely to promote intrinsic evils and the most likely to promote 'other authentic human goods.' So the question becomes: Are there 'grave moral reasons' that permit Catholics to vote for Obama, or any other candidate, despite his or her pro-choice stance, or would such a vote be 'intellectually careless or downright disingenuous,' as Carlin asserts?

...

Like David Carlin, many Catholics rightly oppose Sen. Obama's pro-choice position, which contradicts Catholic teaching. Still, they ought to consider his promise to reduce the number of abortions by fostering socioeconomic conditions that favor choosing life and by promoting abstinence as a way of reducing unintended pregnancies. They should also contemplate the fact that Republican presidents have not done a better job of reducing the number of abortions, as Daniel Finn has pointed out ('Hello, Catholics,' *Commonweal*, November 4, 2005). According to Finn, Republicans like Bush have championed the abortion issue without exerting much energy to eliminate current abortion practice. That may not satisfy the conscience of some Catholics; they may decide to vote against Obama. Still, such a choice must be made after sincerely attempting to discern which candidate will more fully advance values and policies akin to the Catholic vision of solidarity, social justice, and the common good. As the USCCB has taught, Catholics must examine a candidate's stance on the full range of issues that ought to weigh on a Catholic's conscience. Undoubtedly, many Catholics who support Obama have done just that. Catholics who endorse him should strongly encourage him to take steps to limit the evil of abortion. Finally, during this election season Catholic voters should not be duped into believing that the matter is already perfectly clear: Vote for McCain or be a bad Catholic! They ought to take their obligation to vote according to their consciences more seriously than that.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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In the eyes of God, every life (the person on death row, the terrorist, the pre-born, the undocumented) is of equal and infinite value. Any church that starts placing different values on certain lives places itself in direct opposition to the Gospel message which demands that we look upon others in the same way as the One who lets the rain fall on the just and the unjust; who lets the sun shine on the good and the evil. If we insist that opposition to abortion is more important than opposition to war or the death penalty, then we are not even trying to see with the eyes of God.

COMMUNION DENIED

When faith is front and center

By Douglas W. Kmiec

June 16, 2008

A few days ago, I had the privilege of engaging Sen. Barack Obama in private conversation for several hours with Rev. Franklin Graham, Bishop T.D. Jakes and a diverse group of 30 or so religious leaders from Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical and other traditions.

This was an unprecedented sit-down for any political figure, let alone a much-in-demand presidential candidate. Why would the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party devote so much time talking faith rather than politics? Quite simply, because it is the

senator's deep personal faith that explains his audaciously positive hope for his country.

Obama's life is one of accomplishment in the face of unexpected challenge-the all-too-usual perils of an absentee father overcome by the extraordinary love of mother and grandparents; a home with little religious practice surpassed by an early education in Catholic schools and a later immersion in the hard work of faith assisting the poor in Chicago. When Obama picks up the political glass it is uniformly half full, and frankly, when he encounters the skepticism of others-as he occasionally did in our meeting-he casts a smile that doesn't discount or disregard doubt, but somehow manages to engage it with the intelligence of everyone in the room.

The discussion dwelt at some length on abortion. Obama said he earnestly wants to 'discourage' the practice-despite the distortions of some who think if they affix the 'pro-abortion-won't overturn-Roe-label' to the senator, pro-lifers like myself won't give him the time of day. Sorry, good friends, not this year.

Not to understand that there is more than one rather indirect and elusive judicial way to address an intrinsic evil understates the ingenuity of the devout. Describing the abortion decision as a 'difficult, deeply moral one,' Obama sees it as one only the woman can make. Unless her choice affirms life that is not my Catholic view, and I told him so. But disagreement or not, it is abundantly clear from our conversation that Obama shares a common aspiration to reduce the incidence of abortion.

How? Obama is committed to encouraging 'responsible sexual behavior,' discouraging unwanted pregnancies, promoting adoption as a more viable, affordable and appealing option than it presently is, and putting off limits in a manner consistent with the law as the justices see it, late-term abortion. Obama will not exclude abortion from medical coverage to fulfill a health exception 'rigorously defined.'

This replays where we disagree, but the meeting, itself, keeps revealing his appreciation for both the significance of faith and faith differences and an open mind sensitive to the need to protect religious freedom.

Obama complimented my old boss, President Ronald Reagan. Reagan talked in 1980 of 'family, work, neighborhood, peace and freedom,' but never unleashed any systematic revival of the first three, even as he secured-for his time at least-a better peace.

Reagan was high-minded enough, but his prosperous friends did not always notice that the needs of the middle class could be caught in the switches-too well off for help, and stretched too thin not to be subject to spikes of real economic pain. If the middle-class was sometimes left unattended, and it was, no amount of the 'trickle down' gospel could effectively answer the 'cry of the poor.'

Obama's conception of promoting the common good is situated in those regular but

welcoming neighborhoods most of us call home-foreclosure aside. He intends to ask government and non-governmental entities-and you and me-to do our part.

Frankly, it is more than a little exhilarating to be given that much faith and trust.

Douglas W. Kmiec was denied communion by a priest for endorsing Barack Obama. He is a professor of constitutional law at Pepperdine University and was an assistant U.S. attorney general during the Reagan administration.

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For Thrill Value, "Gibbet" Trumps the Teacups

By Rocco Palmo

Whispers in the Loggia

Friday, June 13, 2008

www.whispersintheloggia.blogspot.com

Who needs Disney World when you've got a showdown on translations? By the looks of it, yesterday's Orlando debate and vote on the proposed revision of the Proper of Seasons packed even more of a punch than expected.

NCR's John Allen relays:

[O]nly seven bishops out of 250 Latin Rite prelates in the United States even bothered to propose amendments to the text, a clear sign that most felt the handwriting was on the wall. Like it or not, many concluded, Rome has made clear that the new translations must be closer to the Latin, both in structure and word choice, thus producing a more "sacral" language sometimes remote from ordinary English usage.

All that changed this morning, however, when Bishop Victor Galeone of Saint Augustine, Florida, rose to oppose the proposed text -- despite, he said, fear that doing so may be 'in vain.' A former Latin teacher who still reads Thomas Aquinas in the original language, Galeone made a forceful argument that the new translation is simply too unclear and awkward to be effectively used in American parishes. Among other things, Galeone cited the text's use of the phrase "the gibbet of the Cross." "The last time I heard that word was back in 1949, during Stations of the Cross in Lent," Galeone said.

"I challenge anyone to proclaim what's given here at Mass," he said. "It's very difficult."

"A good translator has to understand not just the original language, but also one's own into which these texts are being put," Galeone said. Despite assurances to the contrary, he said, the new texts are "slavish" with respect to the Latin originals.

"I'm an obedient son of the church, and if these texts are passed as they stand, I will pray with them," Galeone said. "But I feel that the vernacular has been a blessing to our people." Galeone added that with "all due respect" to the recent ruling from Pope

Benedict XVI authorizing wider celebration of the old Latin Mass, he hasn't celebrated the old rite since 1970. If he were asked to do so today, he said, he would instead celebrate the new rite of the Mass in Latin.

Galeone's speech seemed to open the floodgates, as other bishops rose to voice reservations about the new translations.

Auxiliary Bishop Richard Sklba of Milwaukee, for example, said, "If I have trouble understanding the text when I read it, I wonder how it's going to be possible to pray with it in the context of worship."

Sklba warned that if the proposed text were adopted, "our priests and our people" will press the bishops to come back to it "again and again" to remedy perceived defects. "This is not yet mature," he said.

Bishop Donald Trautman of Erie, Pennsylvania, a longtime critic of the new translations, said the texts contain a number of "archaic and obscure" terms, pointing to words such as "wrought," "ineffable," and "gibbet." He also said that the text's preference for mimicking the sentence structure of Latin, featuring long sentences with a large number of dependent clauses, impedes understanding in English. Trautman cited one prayer in the new Proper of Seasons presented as a single 12-line sentence with three separate clauses.

"John and Mary Catholic have a right to have prayer texts that are clear and understandable," Trautman said. "The document before us needs further work."

Bishop Robert Lynch of Saint Petersburg, Florida, thanked Galeone for giving him the "courage for this moment." Lynch then told the bishops that he had recently taken the new Mass texts back to his presbyteral council, composed of 26 priests. Two were in favor of the translation, he said, and 24 were opposed.

He reported their reaction as, "Bishop, do whatever you can, because we can't pray these texts."

"It's a good thing that we're supposed to pause before the orations," Lynch joked, "because we'll have to gather enough breath to pray the prayers."

Other bishops, however, argued that admitted imperfections in the text don't justify further delays in the process.

"It's an imperfect sacramentary for an imperfect people, to be prayed by a celebrant who is also imperfect," said Archbishop George Niederauer of San Francisco. "I respect those who say let's move forward and get a new sacramentary, before they all fall apart in the sacristy."

Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb, the retired archbishop of Mobile who sits on the Vox Clara Commission that advises the Vatican on liturgical translation, said that he doesn't find the new texts "unacceptable or unproclaimable."

“Our genius in celebrating,” he said, will make up for any deficiencies. Further, he said, the average Catholic will receive the new texts “with the eyes of faith,” rather than focusing on its problems “like an English teacher or a Latin teacher.”

Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston said that “with all its difficulties, the translation should go forward,” adding that he believes the new Mass texts “become stronger after Advent, into Lent and Easter.”

Responding to the “let’s move on” argument, Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk of Cincinnati warned that it “depends on what you’re moving forward to,” arguing that the new texts would be “a linguistic swamp.”

Archbishop John Vlazny of Portland made another argument in favor of the text, noting that four other English-speaking bishops’ conferences have already approved it. If the Americans reject it, he said, it could jeopardize the goal of a common text.

“Admittedly, we’re the big ones, but that doesn’t allow us a terribly privileged position,” Vlazny said. “We need a measure of humility in this.”

Echoing a point made by others, Vlazny also argued that today’s texts may seem more “proclaimable” simply because they’re familiar. With time, he said, the new texts will also become familiar, and the issues of syntax and word choice cited by critics “will be a non-problem.”

Bishop Arthur Seratelli of Paterson, New Jersey, chair of the U.S. bishops’ Committee for Divine Worship, defended the texts. “On whole, the translation is a marked improvement,” Seratelli said. “As we use it, as we ourselves and our priests become more familiar with the new language of the liturgy, it will not pose as great a problem as we fear.”

After all that the bishops were unable to reach a decision, largely because of the electoral math.

The rules of the conference require that the text be approved by two-thirds of its members, not just those physically present. Since there are 250 Latin Rite bishops in the United States, 166 “yes” votes are required to approve it, while 83 “no” votes are necessary to reject it.

As it turns out, the Orlando meeting was sparsely attended – one headcount yesterday found just 178 voting members. As a result, this morning’s ballot failed to get enough “yes” votes to approve the text, or enough “no” votes to block it.

As a result, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, president of the conference, announced that bishops who were not present will receive ballots in the mail in order to settle things one way or the other.

Wouldn’t it just be easier to use Latin?

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By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
June 8, 2008
Miami

The papacy is a “gift” of the Catholic church to other Christians, a leading Catholic ecumenist said this morning, but it needs “repair” before those other Christians are likely to accept it.

Specifically, Margaret O’Gara of the University of St. Michael’s College in Toronto called for a papacy that’s “less centralized, less authoritarian, and more respectful of the diversity of local churches.”

O’Gara, the outgoing president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, delivered the concluding Presidential Address at the CTSA annual convention this morning in Miami. O’Gara is a longtime veteran of ecumenical conversations with a variety of Christian denominations.

O’Gara said she has been struck by the readiness of other Christian churches to embrace the papacy, citing a statement from the Anglican/Roman Catholic dialogue that the papacy is “part of God’s design for the church” and from the Lutheran/Catholic dialogue in the United States that the pope can function as a spokesperson for the gospel at the world level.

Pope John Paul II, O’Gara said, was an “engaging figure” for many Protestants, Orthodox and Anglicans, who admired his strong stands on issues such as abortion and war, his commitment to evangelization, and his capacity to project a Christian voice in global debates. At the same time, she said, John Paul’s pontificate left behind “a mixed heritage” ecumenically.

O’Gara cited eight motives for that ambivalence:

1. The Synod of Bishops remained merely advisory to the pope;
2. The authority of episcopal conferences was restricted;
3. A Vatican document on “Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion” asserted that the Petrine ministry is “interior to every fully local church”;
4. The Vatican document *Dominus Iesus* said that some Protestant and Anglican bodies aren’t really “churches”;
5. Cardinals Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper carried out a debate over whether the local or universal church has priority;

6. The term from Vatican II that the church “subsists” in Catholicism was understood to mean that it exists fully only in Catholicism;
7. The ban on women’s ordination was declared definitive;
8. The volume of papal teaching raised questions about its authority, and what role it would play in sister churches if present divisions could be overcome.

In light of all this, O’Gara argued, the papacy must be reformed “in a more pastoral way, in a less centralized way, in a way that defends the diversity of the local churches” before it can serve the cause of Christian unity.

Concretely, O’Gara made two suggestions.

First, she suggested remedying what she called a confusion between papal infallibility and papal primacy, with the latter referring to the pope’s regular business of governance. Quoting the theologian Klaus Schatz, she said that primacy is too often treated as a sort of “ersatz infallibility,” so that even routine administration seems like an exercise of infallibility.

Second, she proposed reconsidering what she called the “classicist” language used by the First Vatican Council in the 19th century to formulate the dogma of infallibility. Rephrasing the teaching in a more historically-minded fashion, she said, could make it less threatening to other Christians.

“Rather than appearing as an unchanging grasp of the truth, infallibility could be reinterpreted as the process through which, over time, the church discerns core teachings of the gospel for its age and culture,” she said.

Doing this, O’Gara said, will require some generosity on the Catholic side.

“Some Catholics don’t want to reform the papacy so that it can be shared with others,” O’Gara said. “They want it all to themselves, as a sign of their ‘identity.’” She challenged Catholics “to be willing, not just to keep wrapping [the papacy] up and offering it, but to do the hard work of reforming it first.”

...

O’Gara also pointed to new difficulties arising from pursuing dialogue in a globalized world, in which fault lines are not merely confessional but often cultural.

She pointed, for example, to her African students, who applaud the way Western Christians oppose abortion but are “scandalized” by the way they abandon their elderly in nursing homes. She said some Hispanic Catholics are ambivalent about ecumenism because their primary experience of Protestants is with fundamentalists whose interest is not dialogue but proselytism.

O’Gara also described her experience more than 20 years ago with her first Protestant student from China. After carefully describing the differences between medieval

Catholicism and Luther on the Eucharist, O’Gara said, this student replied: “But in our church in China we hold both of those positions.”

All these questions, she said, will have to be taken up by a new generation of ecumenists. Doing so, she said, is essential “if we are to retain our Catholic identity.”

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US dioceses rarely told results of priest abuse probes: study

18 hours ago

ORLANDO, Florida (AFP) — US Catholic officials told families the outcome of their probes into accusations of sexual abuse by priests in less than one-third of the cases, a study said Thursday.

Unveiled during a Conference of Catholic Bishops meeting in Orlando, Florida, the preliminary study into the sex abuse scandal that has rocked the church showed that 40 percent of cases were reported between 1988 and 1998.

During that decade, nine out of 10 US dioceses received reports of sexual abuse by priests, said the study by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York.

Families of alleged victims had to make more than one effort to contact the diocese in 60 percent of the cases, it said.

"In 75 percent of the cases the dioceses conducted an investigation but the family was contacted about the result of the diocesan investigation in less than one-third of the cases," the study said.

The research was based on studies of identity and behavior of leaders and graduates of seminaries, and interviews with priests and bishops. The final findings will be released in a few years.

The semi-annual spring meeting of US bishops came two months after Pope Benedict XVI paid a landmark visit to the United States that was aimed at healing the wounds caused by the priest sex abuse scandal.

Benedict referred to the scandal repeatedly during his stay, and took the unprecedented and unexpected step of meeting in Washington with victims of predator priests.

The US church was shaken financially and morally by the scandal, which erupted in 2002 when the then-archbishop of Boston confessed to having shielded a priest he knew had sexually abused youngsters.

Numbers put forward by the US church show there have been 14,000 victims of some 4,000 to 5,000 clerics since the 1960s, and both abuse victims and their supporters have left the church over the scandal.

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This Book Is Not Good

June 15, 2007 / Volume CXXXIV, Number 12

God Is Not Great |How Religion Poisons Everything |Christopher Hitchens |Twelve, \$24.99, 294 pp. |

Reviewed by Eugene McCarraher

Christopher Hitchens used to be a courageous and electrifying writer. An heir to the mantle worn by Thomas Paine, William Hazlitt, William Cobbett, and George Orwell, he aimed his keen and pugnacious intelligence at all things false: from Henry Kissinger to Mother Teresa, from the Clintons to the Taliban, no idol du jour was left unscathed by his rigorous and undaunted mind.

His columns in the Nation during the first stage of the Iraq War (1990-91) are masterpieces of political analysis and moral commentary. With effortless versatility, Hitchens pronounced on literature and art as well as politics, and his judgments provided an invaluable education in sensibility. A socialist in the age of capitalist triumphalism, he embodied the finest of that sometimes ridiculous breed, the intellectual engagé. That was then.

After 9/11, in a celebrated volte-face, Hitchens loudly ambled rightward, resigning from the Nation and burning his bridges to the Left. Detecting intellectual and moral timidity in the anguished ambivalence of his liberal friends and allies, he promoted the Bush administration's "war on terror," blustered tirelessly for the invasion of Iraq, and impugned the integrity of anyone who doubted the wisdom of the cause. Writing for Vanity Fair and appearing frequently on television, Hitchens joined the Beltway commentariat and plunged into that orgy of self-aggrandizement known as punditry. As the TV appearances multiplied, the level of vitriol in his manner rose, cementing his image as a virtuoso and all-but-unvanquishable contrarian.

...

For Hitchens, all you really need to know about religion is its historical malignancy. God Is Not Great, echoing Shelley's charge that religion "taintest everything," recounts its poisonous effects on human affairs. Slavery, genocide, misogyny, racism, complicity in tyranny: it is, in truth, a hefty record of iniquity and shame, and Christians will always need-and I daresay deserve-these painful lessons in humility. But Hitchens turns the ethical lapses of religion into a silly fallacy. If, as he asserts, "an ethical life can be lived without religion"-a point which, to my knowledge, no major theologian has ever denied-Hitchens would also have us believe that unethical lives must be lived with religion.

Then again, this is a writer who understands religion only as a mélange of prohibition and superstition, plus an incitement to violence, and so large parts of the story get erased. Hitchens's claim that the God of Moses "never mentions human solidarity and compassion at all" is preposterous, given the Torah's injunctions about forgiveness of debts, redistribution of land, or openness to strangers, or the prophets' exhortations to mercy, justice, and beating swords into ploughshares. He rightly contends that the crimes of Nazism and Communism do not mitigate the felonies of religion; indeed, he writes, "one might hope that religion had retained more sense of its dignity than that." True, but

that sense of dignity is inseparable from standards by which the religious can identify and condemn atrocities done in their name—standards that fascists and Stalinists never recognized, let alone applied. Doctrines of racial purity lead inexorably to repression, ethnic cleansing, or genocide; acceptance of “historical necessity” inevitably sanctions “the necessary murder,” as Auden later regretted putting it. There is nothing even remotely comparable in these secular ideologies to the command to love one’s enemies. Those Christians down the ages who tried to prevent the crimes of their horrifically errant brethren did so because they believed—often at the cost of their lives or fortunes—that the human person was the *imago Dei*, a conviction they derived from Christian theology.

But Hitchens, like the choir to whom this book is directed, is uninformed about theology and much else in the Christian intellectual tradition. He does try to convince us that he’s serious about religion. Holding up Philip Larkin’s elegiac “Church-going” as the summary of his perspective, he savors its melancholy portrayal of religion as a realm where “all our compulsions meet, / Are recognized, and robed as destinies.” He and his fellow unbelievers, Hitchens assures us, feel “the lure of wonder and mystery and awe.” And besides, some of his best friends are religious.

I’m sure this act plays to rave reviews in the Beltway and Manhattan, but Hitchens is just too acidulous and unfair to pull it off here. One wonders what kind of intellect his religious friends possess if they can’t counter his mocking and condescending charge that religion belongs to the “childhood” or “prehistory of the species”? Has Hitchens never read or sparred with, say, Garry Wills? In a Salon tribute to the late Senator Eugene McCarthy—the last intellectual in American politics—Hitchens recalled that he and Clean Gene had had “highly enjoyable discussions of the more recondite aspects of church teaching.” Why didn’t they merit a page or two here?

Perhaps Hitchens needed the space to show how much he knows about science and its history. Jeering that religion comes from a time when “nobody... had the smallest idea what was going on,” he trades on the moldiest caricatures of medieval ignorance, pandering to the facile scientism rampant among the middle classes. You’d never guess that “scholastic obsessives” such as Robert Grosseteste or Roger Bacon were crucial to the construction of modern scientific methodology, or that the work of Gregor Mendel—an Augustinian priest—was the wellspring of modern genetics.

When it comes to the scientific present, Hitchens proves equally adept at obfuscation. He proclaims ad nauseam the latest discoveries in genetics and paleontology, as though religious believers had never heard of them. He marvels at the exploration of the human genome, but neglects to add that the director of the Human Genome Project, Francis Collins, is an evangelical Protestant. And we get the obligatory arguments against “intelligent design”—arguments that have not only been supported, but in many cases crafted, by religious scientists such as Collins, Kenneth Miller, and John Polkinghorne.

This willful inattention to the harmonious relationships between religion and modern science stems, I suspect, from Hitchens’s embrace of the objectivist delusions of middlebrow scientific mythology. Science, in this view, is the realm of verified facts, testable hypotheses, and reproducible experiments, hermetically protected from the corrupting vagaries of culture, politics, and ideology. Looking to science as our savior is

not entirely pernicious: Hitchens rightly points out, for instance, the central role played by evolutionary genetics in dispelling the phantom of “race.” But you’d also never suspect-and you won’t learn here-that evolutionary science itself has been infected with ideological poison. Take, for example, Darwin’s explicit debt to Thomas Malthus, whose skinflint heresies about food and population were historical germs for laissez-faire and Social Darwinism. Hitchens might also want to re-read *The Descent of Man*, wherein Darwin clearly ranks races (like the “Aryan” and the “Asiatic”) in terms of their proximity to the apes. Indeed, the racist and Malthusian elements in Darwin’s work are subjects on which the new secularists are either silent, delicate, or mendacious. (See “The Gentle Darwinians” by Peter Quinn, *Commonweal*, March 9, 2007.)

Hitchens’s command of philosophy is as dubious as his account of science. All too often his pose of encyclopedic learning rests on name-dropping and straw men. Philosophy in *God Is Not Great* is whatever is polemically useful against religion. So Democritus and Epicurus get cameo roles, while Spinoza becomes an atheist *manqué*. Those philosophers who did or do believe in a God-which is to say, most of the Western philosophical tradition-get nary a mention. There’s a host of Christian philosophers absent from these pages: Alasdair MacIntyre, Elizabeth Anscombe, Charles Taylor, and Alvin Plantinga, to name just a few whose work Hitchens might want to read. But this is a writer who boasts that “I now know enough about all religions to know that I would be an infidel at all times and in all places.”

As for straw-man argument, a single example suffices to reveal Hitchens’s petulant mediocrity in philosophy. The notion of a creator, he observes, raises “the unanswerable question of who...created the creator”-an objection that theologians “have consistently failed to overcome.” Really? Any decent freshman survey could have informed Hitchens that, as Aquinas and many others have patiently explained, God is not an entity and thus is not ensnared in any serial account of causality. Not a thing himself, God is rather the condition of there being anything at all. Thus, “creation” is not a gargantuan act of handicraft but rather the condition of there being something rather than nothing. Creation didn’t happen long ago; it’s right now, and forever. (This is why “creationism” is bad science-because it’s bad theology.)

...

On theological issues, Hitchens is even more at sea. What does he think, or know, of debates about voluntarist conceptions of God, or participatory accounts of our relation with divinity? (I keep forgetting-he knows enough already.) Augustine, he scowls, was “a self-centered fantasist and an earth-centered ignoramus” who believed that the world was “less than six thousand years old”-assertions belied by *The City of God*, and by *The Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, where ***the bishop of Hippo reproached some of the more boneheaded brethren for such literalism (emphasis mine! A.E.)***. Aquinas, meanwhile, exhibits “an impressive faith” which stood up “at least for a while in a confrontation with reason.” Has Hitchens actually opened the *Summa Theologiae*, or the *Summa contra Gentiles*? These are monuments of rational inquiry, and not, as he suggests, fearful evasive maneuvers.

Modern and contemporary theology suffer no less in Hitchens's maladroit paws. John Henry Newman was a "mighty scholar." Karl Barth goes unmentioned, while Dietrich Bonhoeffer is dragooned into service for an "admirable but nebulous humanism"-which is, to put it charitably, certainly one way to read *The Cost of Discipleship* or *Sanctorum Communio*. But then what should we expect from someone who brays that "religion spoke its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago," and who shows no evidence of having cracked a single volume of contemporary theology?

Cravenly, Hitchens tries to grab a prophetic patina from the Jewish and Christian traditions while discarding the theological foundations. That's one of the oldest ruses in the secularist playbook, and nothing better illustrates its brazen fraudulence than Hitchens's remarks about Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Though he professes to be inspired by King and the civil rights movement-"the moral tutors of America and of the world beyond its shores"-Hitchens doesn't comprehend the first thing about that brave community. In utter seriousness he writes that King's refusal to summon hellfire on his enemies makes him a "nominal" Christian. Because he didn't act like a raving crackpot, King becomes, in Hitchens's rendering, a closet or unwitting secularist. What a disgraceful distortion of the historical record it is for Hitchens to excise King's nettlesome theology in order to admit him to our pantheon of political heroes! One imagines Hitchens whispering behind King at the Lincoln Memorial: "You're free at last, free at last. Just don't thank God Almighty."

...

Hidden inside the inflated prose of Hitchens's PR flackery is a conceit common among the educated classes: namely, that the demise of religion would usher in a new age of fearless, democratic cerebration in which each of us would "think on one's own." Hitchens's paean celebrates a secular moral imagination sketched in terms of professional and managerial expertise. Defining the good life for us all in word and image, the business and technical intelligentsia comprise a cultural elite, a rival clerisy whose rhetoric of Science, Progress, and Enlightenment can mystify as effectively as did the bell, book, and candle of the priesthood. In particular, our modern notion of "Progress" has the most beguiling account of an eschatology that never ends.

Hitchens insists that he and his secular allies "do not require any priests, or hierarchy above them," that they "need no machinery of reinforcement," and that "sacrifices and ceremonies are abhorrent to us." In case he hasn't noticed, the corporate elite has constructed the hierarchy, along with a machinery of reinforcement it shares with the nation-state. And Hitchens's uplifting predictions about the God-less future are most savagely belied by the catastrophe in Iraq, where the bogus distinction between religious and secular violence can be seen in all its ideological duplicity. While pointing to the sanguinary unreason of "fundamentalists," the war's advocates have offered up the lives of thousands in sacrifice to a future of Market and Democracy. An Iraqi killed by a U.S. Marine is just as dead as if she were dispatched by a jihadist. Both Hitchens and the jihadist would contend that her death is part of a larger struggle between the forces of light and darkness. To a Christian, she's a victim of *libido dominandi*, whatever the discursive camouflage; to Hitchens, she's the collateral damage of enlightenment.

So enough about the sweetness and light that await us when the gods are finally dead. The war in Iraq, like the history of the twentieth century, demonstrates that secular values provide no inoculation against credulity, madness, and butchery. Conferring a sacral aura on the market and the nation-state, secularism is a parody of religion, and its acolytes can no longer lay claim to the patent on reason and enlightenment. Blinded by the radiance of imperial righteousness, and willing to bless carnage in the most dubious of crusades, Hitchens no longer merits our attention or respect, especially on matters regarding the good life and the just city. If you doubt me, read this book.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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Many rational people of faith would have similar problems with the various “straw gods” that Hitchens contrives only to raze.

Many thoughtful men and women believe in a God who suffers because of the divisions created by religiosity and nationalism. Many believe in a God who is the Source and Summit of creation, in whom we (all) live and move and have our being.

To subscribe to *Commonweal*, and to read this article in its entirety, Click [Here](#) for their no-risk offer.

And finally.

We have lost a voice for the ages; a masterful interviewer; and, perhaps, a holy man. See [Newsweek](#) article about Tim Russert.

... more than 1,500 invited guests gathered in the Concert Hall to remember NBC's Washington bureau chief, who died Friday of a heart attack.

Brokaw set the wistful-but-humorous tone at the outset, saying the assembled included family, friends "and the largest group -- those who think they should be his successor on 'Meet the Press.'" He recalled how Russert, an inveterate political gossip, would start every conversation with "Tommy B, what's happening?"

Brokaw said he has been stopped repeatedly by "strangers on the street, tears in their eyes," including a construction worker who said Russert "seemed to be one of us."

As MSNBC televised the memorial service, anchor Brian Williams, perhaps mindful of criticism that the tributes have grown excessive, sounded a cautionary note. "I'm not much for this talk that Tim's death is the end of what he stood for, his brand of objective journalism, all that he built up. I don't think Tim, candidly, would have believed that either," he said.

Reaching for the metaphorical, Williams addressed the coronary blockage that killed his colleague at 58. "How is it," he said, "that the heart that sustained so many of us through its goodwill stopped beating for the man who depended on it for his life?"

The speakers blended heartfelt admiration for Russert the newsman and onetime political operative with tales of his generosity as a friend and devotion as a father. The stage was framed by oversize photos of Russert doing everything from playing softball to greeting Pope John Paul II.

Maria Shriver, California's first lady, recalled her nervousness when she started at NBC after having been fired by CBS. "I'm Irish Catholic, too -- there aren't that many of us here in this building," Russert told her. Shriver described Russert as a tad overzealous in insisting that she -- a member of the Kennedy clan! -- needed his help getting her daughter into Boston College. (Whatever his efforts, the girl wasn't accepted.)

Russert's onetime boss, former New York governor Mario Cuomo, offered the day's only example of Russert blatantly lying. After Cuomo pushed through the nation's first seat-belt law in 1985, the two men were in a Buffalo motorcade when their car was struck from behind and Cuomo -- having forgotten to buckle up -- hit the dashboard. As reporters rushed over, Russert blurted out: "Thank God for the seat belt!"

Sister Lucille Socciarelli said she named Russert editor of the newspaper at Buffalo's St. Bonaventure School as "a means to channel his excessive energy." She said they often discussed the local basketball teams and "he rattled off all the statistics, right from his own head."

The loudest applause greeted 22-year-old Luke Russert, who displayed great poise as he called his father the most optimistic man he had ever met. "I ask you this Sunday in your hearts and in your minds to imagine a 'Meet the Press' special edition, live from inside St. Peter's gates," he said. "Maybe Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr will be on for the full hour."

It was, without question, the only memorial service ever to begin with strains of Lynyrd Skynyrd -- a selection from Russert's iPod -- and close with a videotaped tribute from Bruce Springsteen. Russert had never been able to book him as a guest, but The Boss recalled seeing him, "beaming like the rising sun," in the front row when he staged a concert for "Today."

In the recording from Europe, where he is on tour, Springsteen said: "Luke, this is for your pop." He delivered an acoustic version of "Thunder Road," with its refrain about seeking the promised land.

Washington Post, June 19

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25174922/>

**Going to church, and watching *Meet the Press*, made it Sunday morning.
God bless you, Tim. You will be missed.**

