

BULLETIN -- SEPTEMBER 3

Two notable newspapers which have a long history in the U.S. are *The Wanderer* and *The National Catholic Reporter*. *The Wanderer* is almost 100 years older than the *NCR*, which is just a little over 50. The difference in their age is about equal to the difference in their approach to the Church and the world. Both are religious-oriented, with a definite Catholic interest. Even someone casually paging through either could tell that most of the news has some connection with the Catholic Church. It wouldn't take much more in-depth reading to discover that the reporters and columnists of the two papers are writing from worlds apart. The fact that each can claim to faithfully represent the best that the Catholic Church has to offer is perhaps a testimony to the Church's universality, and the clear governing principle of canon law that excluding people from the embrace of the Church is a regrettable last resort.

I find the articles in each of these papers interesting, sometimes annoying. A recent (August 11-24 issue) *NCR* column was titled "Unchristian worldview called out," and spilled a lot of ink applauding a July article in an Italian Jesuit periodical that is routinely reviewed by the Vatican. I did not find convincing the columnist's claims that the Italian authors accurately described the Church in the U.S. They see an alliance between bishops appointed before Pope Francis and American evangelicals, and call it "a surprising ecumenism." Most of those bishops, I suspect, would recognize a moral kinship between the Catholic teaching on abortion, for instance, and the position of many evangelicals on the topic. That has led to some conversation at election time, and a certain inclination on both parts to favor that portion of the Republican platform which appears to be pro-life (yet does not always get acted upon).

It didn't take long before it was apparent that the columnist was deriding many bishops and faithful who simply accept the *Catechism* to be authentic Catholic teaching as narrow-minded bigots, warmongers, racists, and advocates of the TV-evangelist "prosperity gospel." His column presented the Church as two distinct factions: post-Francis bishops, yay, yay, yay; pre-Francis bishops, boo, boo, boo. He might as well have come right out and accused Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI of fostering an "unchristian worldview" because of the bishops they appointed; and, no doubt, because of the tenor of their writings and teachings.

Then came the editorial on the back page: "Time for dialogue on sexual ethics." Once again, the cheerleading for one side and ominous foreboding about the other was evident as the writer got into naming personal favorites and pariahs among the bishops. The writer went on: "Without a change in the church's teaching on sex and sexuality, can LGBT people ever hope to be treated with equality and justice by the hierarchy?"

Precisely what kind of dialogue would the *NCR* consider? Obviously one that would achieve the impossible: throwing out those parts of Scripture and tradition which treat in any way of sex and sexuality, and adopting the dominant policy of the world: "Become like us!! It'll be paradise!!" Sounds to me like returning to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad in the Garden of Eden and getting suckered in yet again.

How would we construct a "dialogue" on the very deepest questions of human life? The bishops on one side, laying out Church teaching and explaining its Scriptural, philosophical, and theological origins? The "world" and its representatives on the other

side, whining and complaining about every verse and moral teaching and saying, “Awww, that’s too hard, and some of you guys aren’t so perfect, anyway”? The editor writes very compassionately about theologians like Fr. Charles Curran, whom he names as one of “those who have made the greatest contributions to deepening our understanding of sexual ethics,” only to have his work “condemned by bishops and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.” Yay, yay, yay. Boo, boo, boo. The campiness nearly oozes off the page.

Naturally, the work of “developing the doctrine of sexuality” (???) was heroically begun at the Second Vatican Council, according to the *NCR*. And just as naturally, “This work has been largely stalled by the hierarchy’s unwillingness to loosen its rigid interpretations of millennia-old ideas about natural law and the procreation norm.” Excuse me, *NCR*, even science textbooks refer to part of what you want to dialogue about as the *reproductive system*. We are more than systems, of course, but don’t discount the obvious! The precision of moral theology is overrun by journalistic broadsides.

What’s really disturbing is that the writer makes absolutely no mention of St. John Paul II’s monumental work, *Theology of the Body*, a scholarly yet pastoral exposition of human sexuality which has been groundbreaking in terms of its depth and breadth and beauty. One could arguably claim that no Catholic author in history has ever achieved such a comprehensive, cohesive, and profound study of just about any imaginable facet of the topic. Beginning less than a year after John Paul’s election as Bishop of Rome, the *Theology* was delivered over the course of several years in 129 installments at his Wednesday general audiences. He clearly intended it to be among his major gifts to the Church and the world. To find a publication which calls itself “Catholic” deliberately ignoring a significant portion of the papal magisterium in this way is troubling, to say the least. But perhaps the *NCR* is too “sophisticated” to be moved by such teaching. I mean, he was from *Poland*, after all. Did we hear an ethnically condescending snicker?

The Church’s mission is to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and invite all people to eternal life. That will come at a great personal cost, in which the disciple is called to die and rise with the Savior, not just at baptism, not just at death, but in *all* of her or his baptized life. When we fail, the Lord is anxious to have us back -- not just to keep the census count up, but to continue the wonderful work of proclaiming the Kingdom. If the Church were somehow to “rewrite the rules” on sexuality, what would be next? How about those poor thieves, why shouldn’t they be able to steal? And lying? Hah, everyone knows we each have our own truth! And so on. It’s no wonder the *NCR* and its constituent types are sometimes characterized as “Catholic Lite.” With the attitude manifested in such pieces of journalism, the timeless truths of Catholicism would become as changeable as the Michigan weather. And as confoundingly unpredictable.

You might be hearing more about **Sister Ruth Pfau**, of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary, who died Thursday, August 10. She was born in Germany in 1929; and after World War II escaped from East Germany to attend medical school in West Germany. As a religious, she was sent to India in 1960, but visa problems detained her in Pakistan. There she remained for the rest of her life, dedicating herself to the service of people with Hansen’s disease (leprosy). She personally ministered to the lepers, trained doctors, and founded treatment centers. Due largely to her efforts, the World Health Organization in 1996 declared the disease “controlled” in Pakistan. The number of lepers

being treated in that country now totals only 531, in a mostly-Muslim population of 193 million. Comparisons to St. Teresa of Calcutta have been made for many years. The prime minister stated that her funeral in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Karachi was to be a state funeral -- a most significant honor for a Catholic in a country where Christians frequently suffer open persecution. God bless you!

Fr. Den

Thought for the week: Caution to seniors: How you turned out might not always be the best endorsement for how things were "in your day." (Compliments to *Frazz* cartoonist Jef Mallett).