

ANTI-CATHOLISM AND SEX ABUSE

Fr. Michael Orsi's article, "Fourth-Stage anti-Catholicism" (HPR, January 2010) *was* a call to action for those concerned with the influence of religion in the American public square, and most especially the influence of Catholicism. Fr. Orsi's examples of the subversion of Catholic influence are chilling.

It is of interest that the Pew Research Center released a study in January in which it identified by state the areas of the country with the strongest and weakest exercise of religious practice. The Pew study revealed that the six New England states were at the very bottom of the list of fifty states in religious practice including attendance at worship, engagement in personal prayer, and the profession of a religiously influenced value system.

In 1620, the Calvinist Puritan settlers of New England were resolved to establish a faith-based community of believers free of the remnants of Catholicism in the established Church of England. It is ironic that their settlement of New England for that purpose is now identified as the least religiously informed and influenced area of the country.

It is ironic as well that Boston, the self-identified "Hub" of *New* England, *was* also "ground zero" of the clergy sex abuse scandal that, as Father Orsi put it, "has given the enemies of the Church the knife they needed to attack her." Many Catholics have not yet seen through the legislation filed in various states to extend civil statutes of limitations so that Catholic institutions, especially, can be sued long after applicable statutes have expired. As more than one bishop has pointed out in defense of the Church against these efforts, statutes of limitations exist in legal systems to promote justice, not hinder it.

The entire Catholic community must, in justice, oppose such unconstitutional "ex post facto" laws that, as Fr. Orsi stated well, have but one goal: "to bankrupt the Catholic Church [and] remove the Catholic voice" from the public square.

But there is a reason for some Catholic self-reflection here, and it is an important one. While making the above argument about the necessity of civil statutes of limitations, the U.S. Bishops as a body have aggressively lobbied the Vatican for dispensation from "prescription" in canon law so that priests can face draconian penalties for sexual abuse claims brought years or decades after the Church's *own* statutes for prosecuting them have expired.

Prescription refers to a time period in canon law in which a delict (a crime) exists and must be prosecuted. After the period of prescription expires, the delict ceases to exist.

This is the law of the Church because the Church has long recognized the challenge to

justice posed by old accusations. Like the United States Constitution, the Church long ago established that ex post facto application of revised laws is inherently unjust.

DOUBLE STANDARD

In an apparent state of panic in 2002, American bishops lobbied Rome for a retroactively applied dispensation from the time limits of prescription. The result is that accused priests have faced penalties, including dismissal from the clerical state, in cases that are so old they could not possibly be realistically investigated or offer the accused any realistic hope of a defense. This apparent double standard is yet another knife with which the Church can be attacked, and it is a knife honed and unsheathed by the bishops themselves.

Many of the faithful are scandalized yet again when beloved priests disappear in the night, presumed by their shepherds to be guilty of crimes claimed to have occurred two, three, or four decades earlier. Many accused priests have been simply abandoned by their bishops and fellow clergy. Church laws governing their support and defense have been routinely set aside, and many have languished under dark clouds of accusation for years. Some, far too many, have been summarily dismissed from the priesthood at the behest of their bishops without due process or adequate civil or canonical defense. The Puritan founders of New England would approve of the purging of the priesthood that is now underway, for it is far more Calvinist than Catholic.

It is of interest that the January issue of *HPR* also published a letter from Fr. John Butler entitled "Innocent Priests are absolutely Defenseless." In poignant and exasperated prose, Fr. Butler described well the horror faced by priests wrongly accused of decades-old allegations.

THE REV. GORDON MACRAE CASE

I have been closely following the case of one falsely accused priest who insists on taking the high road both in regard to his own defense and his defense of the Church. Fr. Gordon MacRae has been in prison for over fifteen years, but would have left prison over twelve years ago had he accepted any of the "plea deals" put before him. He writes weekly for a remarkable blog at www.TheseStoneWalls.com. I have written for publication about his case and plan to do so again. It is, as one member of the U.S. Bishops' National Review Board put it, "a sick and sad misdirection of American justice." The late Father Richard John Neuhaus described the case as reflecting "a Church and a justice system that seem indifferent to justice."

What has been most disconcerting for me and other Catholics who have reviewed this case is its treatment in the Catholic media. The nation's largest secular newspaper, The Wall Street Journal, published an extensive analysis of the case against Father MacRae and declared it to be a financially motivated fraud (Dorothy Rabinowitz, "A Priest's

Story," April 27/28, 2005). The Catholic press, apparently fearing the vigilantism of groups like S.N.A.P. and V.O.T.F., has remained largely silent.

On a website located at www.PriestsInCrisis.com, Father MacRae published an article in December entitled "The Dark Night of a Priestly Soul." I urge every Catholic, every bishop, priest, and deacon, to read that article.

I thank Father Michael Orsi, Father John Butler, and *HPR* for fearlessly informing us of the calculated oppression of our faith in the public square. Through it all, however, the Church must herself be a mirror of justice.

Sincerely,

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