Opinion



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It takes a special kind of sinister skill for men trained as lawyers but acting as journalists to violate journalistic ethics and act in total disregard for the values that inform our legal system – all at the same time.

J.D. Flynn and Ed Condon, who founded The Pillar earlier this year, managed that artless feat in the past fortnight. Their article outing Msgr. Jeffrey Burrill because he was using a gay hookup app was, as Columbia University journalism professor Todd Gitlin told NCR, "scummy." Gitlin said their method of data collection was "illicit, indefensible, and all-around contrary to journalistic ethics."

Among the values upon which our Western legal systems, both civil and ecclesiastic, are built is an abhorrence of unjust searches and seizures. The government needs a warrant to invade the privacy of your home or your phone. Issuing a warrant requires the government to demonstrate probable cause to believe evidence of a crime will be found. We allow criminals we are quite sure committed heinous acts to go free if the evidence against them was tainted by an improper search. What probable cause did Flynn and Condon have to ruin the career of a priest who committed no crime?

Flynn posted a tweet to justify why he and Condon decided to publish such an ethically challenged article. The tweet raises as many questions as it answers. For example, Flynn writes: "During the course of our work and our preparation to report on it, we have contacted ecclesiastical leaders and had fruitful and positive off-the-record conversations about our work."

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Now, almost all reporters engage in off-the-record conversations in order to get information that helps them make sense of a story. Even if you can’t report on that conversation, it can help a journalist understand what they learned from on-the-record interviews.

But that does not seem to be the reason Flynn is invoking these unnamed "ecclesiastical leaders" here. He is not suggesting they functioned as a source, confirming what the app data found; he is suggesting that they approve of his decision to publish the piece.

Far be it from me to insist that a journalist reveal a source. However, if you are not using the source to confirm your reporting, why all the secrecy? Did these "ecclesiastical leaders" think it was a good idea to ruin a priest's career, invade another person's privacy, because it would result in some benefit for the church? If so, let them come forward and claim the mantle of a churchman, of a hero really, for encouraging – in the strictest sense of that verb, for imparting courage – to these young journalists, bravely exposing sin.

Flynn also said the decision to publish was motivated by "an obvious correlation between hookup app usage and a high-ranking public figure who was responsible in a direct way for the development and oversight of policies addressing clerical accountability with regard to the church's approach to sexual morality. … There is no indication, at all, that the leader in question was using the app for any purpose pertaining to minors, and we would not wish to insinuate anything to the contrary."

Nice try. The article relied precisely on the insinuation that because Msgr. Burrill might, repeat might, have engaged in gay sex with adults he was somehow unfit to determine policies regarding the protection of minors for clergy sexual abuse.

Furthermore, when, in a second article, this brave duo turned attention to the hookup data of the parish priests in Newark, were those parish priests "responsible in a direct way for the development and oversight of policies addressing clerical accountability"? The information about the Vatican in a third article was similarly vague.

Let's stop kidding each other. Reading these three articles invited the same sensation of disgust decent people feel watching a couple of high school bullies shouting "fag!" at a kid they don't like. If you liked it when the bullies did that, you will have appreciated these articles. If, like most decent people, you did not like bullies then or now, you found yourself feeling disgusted.

Condon and Flynn have been relentless in asserting that they are executing a different kind of journalism, that they will not permit any lousy ideological considerations to affect their pursuit of the truth on behalf of Holy Mother Church. In this instance, they think the universal abhorrence at the sexual abuse of children is enough to distract the reader from the fact that nothing in their article has to do with sex abuse.

Here is the rub. After Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City-St. Joseph was found guilty of failing to report the fact that one of his priests had child pornography to civil authorities and resigned, he became a chaplain in the diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska, where Flynn was working. Asked about the disgraced bishop's assignment, Flynn told the Journal Star: "It doesn't strike me as particularly Christian to search out a person who made a mistake and continue to hound him about it."

So what is the difference? A monsignor who has done nothing to excuse or facilitate child sex abuse can be hounded but a bishop who did excuse a priest's use of child porn should not be hounded?

When Flynn and Condon started The Pillar back in January, they called it a "new journalistic project, a new Catholic, apostolic project." In the podcast immediately following the outing of Msgr. Burrill, Flynn began by saying the story is "an important story. … it has made an impact in the life of the church."

St. Francis of Assisi and the pandemic both also had an impact on the life of the church. Is "impact" the correct bar an "apostolic project" should be required to cross? It is a low bar, yet, if you listen to these podcasts, it is clear Flynn and Condon think they are shooting for the stars, bravely going where other journalists are too timid to go.

In fact, no matter how high they shoot, they land in the gutter. It is not a lack of timidity that lands one in the gutter. It is a lack of ethics.

The last of the three articles, which focused on the use of dating apps within the walls of the Vatican, claimed that the information they were disclosing was important because it posed a "security risk" to the Vatican, especially to its conduct of diplomacy, even more especially in the case of diplomacy with the Chinese government, which had once owned the company that ran one of the hookup apps. The implication is that the Chinese government could blackmail a cleric to do their bidding by using this same information.

That concern is ridiculous. In the 1950s, the prospect of being outed might have been enough to make one susceptible to blackmail, but it is 2021. What is more, those who work in the Vatican are answerable to a pope who famously said, when posed a question about this exact situation, "Who am I to judge?"

I suspect this is a key to understanding this particular instance of "Catholic, apostolic" journalism. Flynn and Condon, and the "ecclesiastical leaders" for whom they previously worked — men like Archbishop Charles Chaput, Archbishop Samuel Aquila and Bishop James Conley — have waged a culture war precisely to try and drag the church back to their imagined understanding of the 1950s, and in recent years, to try and erect an alternate magisterium to that of Pope Francis. For the culture warriors, their Grindr reports are catnip.

The whole episode, in all its vulgar, unethical tawdriness, is only another example of how desperate, how pathetic and how un-Christian the culture warriors are willing to be. It is remarkable only in the fact that even culture warrior organizations like the EWTN-owned Catholic News Agency refused to jump into this particular gutter. These pseudo-journalists had no such qualms. They should be deemed persona non grata by the church, by other real journalists, by decent people everywhere.