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Dolan's Pre-emptive Strike Risky Business

by Ken Briggs

NCR Today

To their credit, most Catholic leaders have not played the "anti-Catholic" card during the long and gruesome series of revelations of priests' sexual abuse of children. Though crimes -- and the reports about them -- have been bitter pills, bishops and other leaders have shown an increasing tendency to face them without placing the blame on factions out to get them.

Not so the new archbishop of New York, Timothy Dolan, who flashed this canard in a virulent attack on the *New York Times*. He lumps together three pieces -- Maureen Dowd's column critical of the nuns' investigation (full disclosure: I was quoted in it) and two that involved Laurie Goodstein, one on a Franciscan who fathered a child who's now dying and another on the Pope's welcome of Anglicans -- in a furious blog diatribe on the paper as the enemy of the Catholic church. This was after the *Times* turned down his bid to place the attack on the paper's Op-Ed page.

Dolan's strategy is to make grand assumptions about motives, which he believes to be hostile to Catholicism, rather than to discuss the actual content of any of the articles. He apparently has no basis for saying that the articles were inaccurate, just that he was affronted that they got the kind of prominent play that they did. As proof, he submits that the *Times* story about Orthodox Jews who were arrested for child abuse weren't pursued with the same prosecutorial, even persecutorial fervor with which Catholic sex abuse stories have been. And why, he asks accusingly, would the *Times* print a story about the Franciscan priest that was old, never mind the merits of the story itself.

The blog itself sounds plaintif, as if it were from a leader of neglected little religious group that was always lost in the coverage and may have a legitimate gripe. But the archbishop sits astride an institution that has dominated religious life in New York for a long time. It has usually had its way with the media. Maybe that has become considered an entitlement.

Laurie Goodstein, the Times national religion correspondent, is a superb reporter and writer. She did those pieces and many others with her usual level of integrity and professionalism. For Dolan to attack her and Maureen Dowd in the hysterical manner in which he did not only is grossly unfair but stands as an illustration of what their stories are largely about -- the unacceptable treatment of women.

His blast also sounds like the new kid on the block trying to make a name for himself by taking on the newspaper goliath as the defender of the church. Maybe he thinks it will enshrine him in boldness and visibility.

It may rouse the dispirited forces in the church who have long clung to the anti-Catholic canard, hate the media and are looking for St. George to slay the dragon off Times Square. But otherwise it's got problems. Offering heat but no light, dealing personal attacks, acting like a spoilsport because the Times won't run your article and implying that the Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn should have received tougher coverage isn't likely to win you many friends.

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