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How to Diss a Cardinal

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NCR Today

“Seek joy where joy may be found” is one of those rare aphorisms that seems to combine perfectly the human capacity to hope with an earthy sense of the practical. It occurred to me while reading Austen Ivereigh’s post about Cardinal Castrillon-Hoyos’ decision not to preside at a special Mass in the extraordinary form here in Washington this coming weekend.

Ivereigh thought the Paulus Institute, which is sponsoring the Mass, missed an opportunity to clearly say that the change was a result of the recently released information about the cardinal’s complicity in encouraging a French prelate not to report the crime of sex abuse to civil authorities. He thought this would show that the conservative liturgical movement is not mindlessly tied to the kind of clericalism that permitted the cover-up of clerical sex abuse for so many years. I agree.

But, the cardinal was not only disinvented, he was dissed. I do not wish to dismiss lightly what a wake-up call this event is for the cardinals of the curia. In their world, cardinals are the object of all manner of bowing and scraping; They are not called “princes of the Church” for nothing. They are not in the habit of being “disinvented” to anything. Nor, are they in the habit of having the Vatican distance itself from them, the way Father Lombardi did when Castrillon-Hoyos’ letter first appeared. Of course, I wish we lived in a world and in a Church where there were stiffer penalties for the kind of hierarchic malfeasance we have seen. But, make no mistake – The Paulus Institute did not disinvent the cardinal on its own. I do not know if Archbishop Wuerl or the papal nuncio Archbishop Sambi intervened. Perhaps it was someone in Rome. Whoever it was, someone recognized a PR nightmare of the highest order and was willing to diss a cardinal to avoid it. That is not courage, but it is progress. Slow, glacial progress, but progress nonetheless.

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