

Q & A: Sister Mary Ann Walsh

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 1, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Q & A

Each week, this feature will pose one question to five different newsmakers and analysts.

Our first interviewee is Sister Mary Ann Walsh, Director of Media Relations for the USCCB.

This week's question: What is the principal impediment to good media coverage of Catholicism/religion?

Sister Mary Ann: Pre-conceived ideas. The U.S. bishops have done more to keep children safe than any other organization I know. The Catholic Church has set up a child protection system through which more than 5 million children and 2 million adults have been trained in child protection Parish and Catholic school staff and volunteers undergo background checks, even fingerprinting, and know not to be alone with children. Children know to turn away from someone who makes them uncomfortable. They know what to do if anyone is bothering them. The bishops' Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, adopted by the bishops in 2002, makes it clear that any cleric who has been credibly accused of abusing a child is to be removed from ministry. The Charter calls for full cooperation with legal authorities in reporting abuse. Despite this, when people are asked if the Church is doing enough about this sin and crime, the majority say no. When asked what the church should do, they reply: conduct background checks, train children, ban molesters from the priesthood ? all of which the church has been doing for almost a decade. In 2009, there were six instances of minors abused by clerics in the Catholic Church. This is six too many but far fewer than the public think.

Part of the problem is that presentations of old cases, horrific ones, such the case of a Wisconsin priest abusing deaf children decades ago, make people think we're talking about crimes of today. They also feed on an anti-Catholic attitude which is a current running through U.S. history. If there were half the emphasis on what the church is actually doing today to address this problem the public would have more useful information. If there were openness to the fact that this problem occurs in other areas of society, including sports and youth groups, this problem seriously affecting children all across America might be adequately addressed.

Right now this is the most glaring example of pre-conceived ideas, but there are others. There is an automatic disdain in the media of church teaching on sexuality and issues related to it. The church's positions promoting abstinence before marriage, opposition to same-sex marriage, and respect for celibacy for priests, for example, invoke ridicule rather than respect. Each of the church's positions has a spiritual, psychological and human rationale but the mainstream media are not inclined to give the church a fair hearing.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. called Anti-Catholicism "the deepest-held bias in the history of the American people" and is credited with saying "anti-Catholicism is the anti-Semitism of the liberal." He called anti-Catholicism "the only remaining acceptable prejudice." This sad fact of American history may be what inclines media to accept too easily criticism of the church and to become deaf and blind to the good the church does and its many contributions to U.S. society.

Tomorrow's Q & A Features ABC's Good Morning America Host George Stephanopoulos

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