In New York, a matter of priorities

by Joe Feuerherd

In New York, to quote a local legend, it's déjà vu all over again, circa 1983.

The jovial and scrappy Irish-American archbishop skillfully spins the information-hungry media, occasionally wading into controversial waters. Meanwhile, a new Catholic governor named Cuomo grapples with a full plate: an out-of-control budget, a corrupt political culture, an often ignorant, always aggressive and easily-manipulated media, and church officials? seemingly intent on bringing him down a notch or two.

A Queens-bred toughie of legendary temper and tenacious ambition, Andrew Cuomo was once a standup guy. Quite literally. A student at all-boys Archbishop Molloy High School in the mid-1970s, Cuomo stood at lunch. Everyone did. Molloy?s cafeteria was lined with 5-foot-high Formica-topped tables, but no chairs. This was either a character-building device (virtue through verticality) or space-saving necessity. I went to school there for two years in the early ?80s and was never certain.

Some things have changed. Tempered by age, Cuomo?s public persona has softened. Molloy admits girls. The cafeteria has chairs.

And the divorced, pro-choice Catholic governor shares his Westchester County home with his three daughters (they divide their time between Cuomo?s ex-wife, Kerry Kennedy, and their dad), and Sandra Lee, the popular Food Network television hostess (?Semi-Homemade Cooking with Sandra Lee?). Cuomo and Lee are not married.

The governor?s living arrangement does not sit well with Edward Peters, a canon lawyer who teaches at Detroit?s Sacred Heart Seminary. Cuomo is guilty of public concubinage? and, as such, should not
approach Communion,? wrote Peters. He continued, ?If he does approach, he should be refused the sacrament.?

Last year, in a form of patronage familiar to anyone who has spent time in Albany, N.Y., Peters was appointed to serve as a consultant to the Apostolic Signatura. That Vatican high court is headed by Cardinal Raymond Burke, the prelate who told pro-choice presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004 not to take Communion in the St. Louis archdiocese, then headed by Burke. From his Vatican perch (he too perhaps a beneficiary of the type of patronage for which public embarrassments are ?kicked upstairs?), Burke has continued to argue that pro-choice Catholic politicians are not really Catholic at all and should be excommunicated.

The cardinal?s acolyte, Peters, is self-described as ?one of the most widely-known lay canon lawyers in North America,? a claim for which the competition is not especially keen. His Vatican consultancy, at least in the eyes of the New York media, makes him a ?Vatican official.? God help us.

Albany Bishop Howard Hubbard should sanction Cuomo, Peters said. In a reprise of a role he played during the 12-year gubernatorial tenure of Mario Cuomo, Andrew?s father, Hubbard told Peters to mind his own business.

But the press, on Pavlovian cue, ran with the story of how ?the Vatican? was contemplating sanctions against the governor. After some back-and-forth, Cuomo sat down for lunch with New York?s bishops, including the media-friendly archbishop of New York, Timothy Dolan.

Dolan, proving that ?Vatican officials? are not always ham-handed in their appointments, handled the situation deftly.

?That?s the kind of delicate pastoral issue that this is probably not the best forum to speak about,? the archbishop, following the meeting with the governor, said of the Cuomo-Peters brouhaha. The bishops used the meeting to lobby Cuomo on aid to Catholic schools and other issues, including the large cuts education, health care and social service programs face in the midst of a dire budgetary situation. That seems precisely where the public conversation between church and state should be: on saving services to those on the margins and preserving good schools for kids.

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As state legislatures across the country prepare to adjourn for the year, church-supported programs that serve the poor are targets of the kind of unprecedented cutbacks that only unprecedented fiscal crises force. Reeling from the sex abuse crisis (and the hierarchy?s preoccupation with ensuring that further high-payment settlements to abuse victims are forestalled) the church?s political influence is waning.

Meanwhile, Peters and some in the New York media want to talk about Andrew Cuomo?s relationship with Sandra Lee. That is not going to change. But good for the New York bishops that they didn?t let the narrow side agendas of a few overwhelm their obligation to promote the common good as they see it.

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