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Dolan on 60 Minutes: 'Charmer' or 'Shrill scold'?

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

I teach two sections of an introductory religion course at an area college. One section is filled with freshman who were raised Catholic. The other section is populated by adults, many of them well above the age of thirty. All but two of these students were also raised Catholic.

Recently I assigned them a paper in which I asked them to create their own religion. I asked them what rituals they would practice, what texts they would hold sacred, what their moral code would be, and what their leadership would look like. They were welcome to include any elements of the faith in which they were raised.

I read the freshman papers first. Remarkably, only one student created a detailed, rigid moral code and devised a hierarchical leadership structure. The remainder of the students believed that morality should be determined by one's individual conscience. Most chose not to have leadership, and others sought leadership from among volunteers.

I chalked up these results to the naiveté and idealism of youth.

But these excuses could not explain the strikingly similar ideas that arose in the papers from my adult students.

If the religions being created promoted libertine lifestyles of excess and materialism, I could see why they would gravitate toward such ostensible moral relativism. But most of these students devised religions founded on principles of love, equality, justice, service to the poor, and respect for all creation.

When I questioned both classes about this lack of leadership and a fixed moral code, I received the same

answers. They do not trust religious leadership. Why? Because they believe that religious leaders are not living out the morality they espouse.

Not only do these students believe that they do not need a mediator between themselves and God, many believe that the mediator may actually taint or obstruct their relationships with the holy.

If these same students tuned into Morley Safer's interview with Archbishop Dolan on Sunday night, I wonder if any of their opinions might be amended.

The opening scenes of the profile were dominated by images of a beaming, red-faced cleric laughing boisterously while encircled by admirers. Babies are kissed, children are embraced.

He unabashedly gulps down a beer and grabs at a tray of hors d'oeuvres. He makes relentless jokes about his weight. In one shot of him with St. Peter's in the background, he sucks indulgently on a cigar. This Archbishop's love of life is not limited to the womb.

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The images are a notable departure from Dolan's predecessor, Cardinal Edward Egan, who was more likely to be spotted blessing the tables at New York City's five star restaurants or posing for photos at a Metropolitan Opera gala.

Is Dolan, perchance, the people's Archbishop? This certainly seems to be the image he is cultivating, though it remains unclear to what degree he is being truly uninhibited or shrewdly calculating.

More than one journalist has referred to him as a "charmer," and Safer himself cannot help but admit the Archbishop's "likeable and fun-loving" side.

But once the laughter dies down and the pigs in a blanket are but a grease-stained memory, this man for all seasonings unveils his very unpopular convictions.

On sex abuse, Dolan mourns what has happened, but insists "that's over with." He wants a church that is no longer "hung up on these headline issues [of women's ordination, married priests and gay marriage]." Yet, he fails to acknowledge that it is precisely the institutional church that keeps making these issues into headlines.

If the archbishop were to look at the Web site of the U.S. bishops' conference today, he would find twelve top stories. There is one story each about Japan, poverty, the death penalty, and world youth day. There are four stories, however, centered on the condemnation of homosexuality.

Apparently, after spending so much time with Dolan, Safer gets the feeling that deep down in his heart, the Archbishop would like to see changes in the Catholic Church. Dolan admits that there are changes that he would like to see, but they are not the reforms that Safer has in mind:

"I don't want to see changes in the church when it comes to celibacy or women priests or a clear teaching on the sanctity of human life and the unity of marriage between one man and one woman forever. I'd love to see changes in the perception of the church as some shrill scold. We need to change that."

A suggestion: to cease being viewed as "shrill scold," it is important not to alienate the majority of the population in the preceding sentence. It would also help to refrain from excommunicating and firing those

who intelligently and pastorally question some of your beliefs.

Safer, to his credit, pushes Dolan on this statement. He reminds the archbishop that many feel that the church is "heading down the wrong road" with its unwillingness to engage in the struggles and questions that push so many Catholics away from the church.

A flash of previously unseen frustration passes over the Archbishop's face. He shrugs, "So I guess you've got two different world views there."

After a brief pause for head-scratching, Safer replies, "And you ain't gonna change?"

Dolan laughs loudly—perhaps, one might say, even a little shrilly. "I'm in one world, you're in the other. I'm glad you're visiting."

At last, a statement with which almost all Catholics can agree.

Would that the archbishop cease demanding that, in order to be considered "faithful," Catholics must dwell in his world, which is awash with avoiding the pastoral needs of many, benefiting from an elite lifestyle, denying ongoing abuses and cover-ups, and ostracizing anyone who disagrees with him and his ilk.

Would that he visit more often the world of women called to holy orders, gay couples in loving, committed relationships, laicized men who were forced to choose between love and ministry, and impoverished pregnant women.

Being faced with a hierarchy that refuses to listen to and respect their concerns, there is little wonder that Catholics, like my students, question not only the value of their current religious leadership, but the importance of religious leadership overall.

Such Catholics have been so disillusioned by the unrepentant display of immoral acts by clergy -- whether through living lives of privilege and indulgence, covering up sexual abuse, rejecting the gifts of women and LGBT persons, or shaming women who have had abortions -- that they no longer see the significance of sharing a common identity and common values.

Though they decry the triumph of individualism in our culture, church leaders deny that their own wrongdoings have forced many Catholics to be suspicious of communities founded on religious beliefs. As a result, they never have the chance to understand the powerful, sacramental communion that arises when a group of people gathers around a Eucharistic table or a baptismal font or even a casket covered in a white pall.

Archbishop Dolan is well aware of the fruits of the institutional church's failings. He admits he is troubled that the second largest denomination in the U.S. is comprised of former Catholics. But, at least on the surface, he seems content to keep laughing through it all.

It is laughter that echoes off the walls of a rapidly emptying church.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

You can view the entire interview here. Scenes of Dolan beer drinking and cigar smoking can be viewed here.

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