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Firing bishops and the new evangelization

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

It looks like the church is developing parallel universes.

To the left are writers and a few bishops who think some topics shouldn't be swept under the Vatican carpet; their stories gone viral. To the right are card-carrying genuine real live Catholics whose often angry blogs support their idea of the One True Faith.

Most of us are in the middle. Daily battered by a tsunami of information, we are increasingly selective of what messages we receive. So we choose.

Not a good situation for those nice folks in Rome, who invented information control. Church messages once came from the pope with seals and signatures. The Gospel was proclaimed only in Latin, explained solely by clerics. The law was sacrosanct, only available to the canonists.

It's a new world for sure.

Doctrinal dust-ups grab headlines left and right: think Roy Bourgeois, Elizabeth Johnson.

Then there is William Morris.

Nearly coincidental to Australian Bishop William Morris' forced removal from the diocese he's led since 1993, Catholic bloggers gathered in Rome at the invitation of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication. The pope's direct message to the bloggers: be civil in cyberspace, even when defending Catholic belief. The pope's message to Bishop Morris (as translated by major media): get lost.

Does anyone else see a problem here?

Bishop Morris wanted to talk about what an awful lot of Catholics are thinking about: With a shrinking cadre of celibate priests, how will we provide Eucharist? Morris's 2006 pastoral letter said the church might "need to be much more open" to ordaining married and widowed men put forth by their communities, welcoming back former priests, ordaining women, and recognizing orders of the Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting Church (the latter the Australian union of Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregationalists).

Following an apostolic visitation and a secret report by Denver's Archbishop Charles Chaput, Morris ended up in the purple waste basket along with Zambian Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo, whose ordinations of married men as priests and bishops earned him both excommunication and laicization. (If you're keeping track, mostly liberal bishops get fired. Bishop abusers go off to abbeys, and bishop co-conspirators stay in place.)

What's going on? Morris only wanted to talk about what everyone else is talking about. Talking is not doing.

The problem is information control. From the bleachers, it seems rather than an internal discussion led by a seminary-trained Catholic bishop, Rome wants to depend on bloggers of various descriptions and dispositions.

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Why? Hint: look to your right.

The 750 or so multinational bloggers who applied for the Rome meeting were vetted by Vatican staff and 150 were chosen by lot. The U.S. contingent included the American Papist, and the Ironic Catholic, as well as Crescat, (a self-described mackerel snapping papist), and the writer of Whispers in the Loggia.

The bloggers, relatively young and well-meaning, "publish" unedited pieces, effectively managing electronic water coolers around which their friends (in the Facebook sense) gather to agree. Because the blog beast needs constant feeding, conservative Catholic bloggers present the last best chance for the Vatican to get out unfiltered missives. (The bloggers at the meeting asked for the same advance-release courtesy the Vatican Press Office now gives major news outlets.)

So the Vatican has gotten into the spin-control business big time. It summoned the troops to headquarters in preparation for the megabyte war. Is this the "new evangelization"?

What about the bishops? Aren't they the ones who explain magisterial teaching? Are they now by-passed for the I-Pad brigade? What kind of evangelization is this?

I don't know whether the Vatican is recognizing or causing the leveling of the playing field, but when one screen shows a bishop fired and the other screen shows predominantly uncredentialed individuals being encouraged to "put out" the Christian message, you have to wonder whether the medium has replaced the message.

It is a question of emphasis. The days of only bishops preaching went out with St. Dominic and his confreres. The Vatican that demands only clerics preach in church recognizes the Internet cathedral as a setting for its message, but that message -- whether in major media or the blogs -- is increasingly harsh

and essentially confusing.

It is not about words. It is about action. The world cries daily and desperately for ministry of the sort Dorothy Day advised: individual, personal and personalized ministry given freely one by Christian one, in living (not pixilated) color.

The real message -- the new evangelization -- is not what is said, but what is done. And what is done by Rome sometimes clouds the message.

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