

Bishops as umpires

Richard McBrien | Jun. 20, 2011 | Essays in Theology

A few weeks ago I devoted space to Cardinal Donald Wuerl's reference to bishops as umpires in matters of doctrinal disputes. I noted in that column that the problem with the analogy is that it doesn't take into account that bishops, like judges, can and do differ along ideological grounds. That is why there are so many 5-4 decisions even at the level of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The strike zone (that is, the leeway given to theologians like Sr. Elizabeth Johnson of Fordham University) is interpreted more liberally by some bishops than others. Instant replays also show that umpires can be wrong, not only in calling balls and strikes but also in calling players out or safe on the bases.

One of my faithful readers, perplexed by the recent action of the Bishops' Committee on Doctrine against Johnson, pointed out that there is still another angle to be addressed, namely, whether bishops can legitimately fulfill their role as 'umpires' if they lack the necessary competence in theology or Sacred Scripture to serve as umpires in theological or biblical disputes.

Before an umpire can work in the Major Leagues, for example, he has to go through rigorous training in umpire school; he has to gain experience in the minor leagues; and then, if he is considered to be good enough, he can be promoted to the big leagues.

But even then he is not deemed ready to work in the playoffs much less the World Series until he has proven himself day in and day out umpiring in Major League games -- behind the plate, on the bases, or along the foul lines in the outfield.

Many Catholics today wonder if comparable periods of training and probation also apply to future bishops. My correspondent asks: 'How can bishops whose theological preparation is woefully inadequate beyond, at most, the seminary level presume to be calling the plays in the theological academy?'

'Would we allow a movie star with an honorary doctorate in the arts determine the authenticity of a disputed Picasso?'

'It is beyond me,' the correspondent continues, 'how the bishops can claim, with a straight face, to be teachers sitting in judgment on teachers when they plainly cannot understand the arguments much less the conclusions.'

According to the Code of Canon Law, revised in 1983, there *are* qualifications that have to be met before a priest can be promoted to the episcopate. Among these are 'possession of a doctorate or at least a licentiate in sacred scripture, theology, or canon law from an institute of higher studies approved by the Apostolic See or at least [he must be] truly expert in these same disciplines' (can. 378, 5°).

I am not aware of any study of the many bishops appointed under Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI, but some critics have complained that the conditions have not been met in all cases. t

Moreover, commentators could point out that the degrees that new bishops have acquired were earned some years earlier and often without any subsequent teaching experience.

Teaching requires keeping up in one's field, dealing with questions posed by students at the graduate level, publishing books and scholarly articles, and active participation in one's professional organizations.

It is a rare bishop nowadays who has come directly and recently from the scholarly world in theology, Sacred Scripture, or canon law. Having a non-episcopal executive director of the Committee on Doctrine who has such credentials matters only if he is regarded by his scholarly peers as a mainline theologian, biblical specialist, or canon lawyer.

If, on the other hand, he is considered to be ideologically inclined, in tune with the most conservative members of the Committee on Doctrine, his role as the principal author of the committee's report becomes of little or no positive consequence.

My correspondent ended her comments by insisting that the bishops owe Johnson and the whole theological academy an apology.

In my response, I noted that Johnson would have to wait a long time, if not forever, for an apology. I reminded my correspondent that I went through the very same process with the same committee in the mid-1990s.

It found similar "problems" with the new edition of my *Catholicism* (see *Origins* 25/43, 4-18-96). I also pointed out at the time that the bishops had failed to follow their own procedures, which precipitated an exchange of correspondence with the committee (pp.744-48).

The Catholic Theological Society of America on June 7, 1996, agreed that the committee had failed to follow proper procedures.

No apology was forthcoming.

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