

## Cuomo Catholicism

Ken Briggs | Jun. 29, 2011 NCR Today

The tensions between the two Cuomos and the archbishops of New York poignantly exemplify the growing disarray of the Catholic church in America.

Mario, the father and former governor, incurred the wrath of Cardinal O'Connor by backing women's right to choose abortion (while rejecting it personally) and now his son and successor, Andrew, has irked Archbishop Dolan by managing to win approval for gay marriage.

Dolan campaigned vigorously against passage of the measure by the state legislature and reacted bitterly to the end result, warning that gay marriage set New York on the path to moral calamity.

Not many decades ago, New York politicians would have gone to the archbishop, hat in hand, eager to please and loathe to alienate the chancery over any such policy. As head of America's most prominent archdiocese, the archbishop bore the marks of traditional hierarch -- religious and secular -- that elevated him to a titular supremacy of the city's Christians.

The erosion of that power has been evident in the wake of Vatican II's emphasis on the primacy of individual conscience, prayerfully and respectfully well grounded, in making moral decisions. It doesn't promise that the individual will choose rightly in the eyes of God, but it recognizes the person as final arbiter in the weighing of those decisions.

Dolan, like many bishops, still plays by the old rules that insist on the supreme wisdom of their moral pronouncements and still attempt to enforce their dictates by attempting to punish politicians who dissent over matters such as abortion and gay sex. In recent years, they have clashed with Catholic public officials who opposed certain church teaching, often echoing Mario Cuomo's principle that it's possible to agree personally with Church doctrine without demanding that the public conform to Catholic views.

The Cuomos, meanwhile, have joined a growing movement among lay Catholics to consider their own counsel on moral matters while retaining their identity as Catholics, refusing to label themselves as outcasts.

There has been no significant effort to my knowledge to bridge this gulf. As one result, millions of Catholics, including many of its brightest and best educated, have turned away from the church. The Pew Report's finding last year that nearly one third of those born Catholic in America have left the church has documented how wide the gulf has become and has left many Catholics stunned.

As has been pointed out by many scholars, the old Roman law was absolute but left a host of loopholes. By contrast, Anglo Saxon law was specific and relatively unforgiving. While American Catholicism has allowed plenty of exceptions, the classical all-or-nothing standard remains widely in effect among the bishops.

Sorrowful it is, therefore, that the Cuomos and Dolan stay in their separate camps, one brooding and defeated, the other two living, unsteadily perhaps, in an emerging expression of Catholicism

The stalemate is to a great extent due to the legacy of reducing religion to morals. Biblical faith does have moral implications, but when they are imposed as special litmus tests, churches fall into rigidity and judgmentalism. Purges follow; the message of salvation collapses under the weight of moral conformity. A succession of American religious movements have sapped their energies in these futile causes.

Vatican II, and wider cultural forces, liberated Catholics and many other Christians from the view that Christianity was primarily moral rules and regulation; in addition, they discovered the rich spirituality that underlies it all.

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