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Attack on Girl Scouts shows current law isn't working

Joan Chittister | May. 16, 2012 From Where I Stand

This month, it was the Leadership Conference of Women Religious that bishops were concerned about. Before that, it was Catholic Charities in the United States. Then it was Caritas, the church's umbrella organization for the coordination of international charity. And now it is the Girl Scouts. Each of them has been curtailed, "investigated" or put in some kind of canonical receivership because of their reputed lack of orthodoxy on sexual issues or because of association with other groups that, according to the bishops, have the same problem. And all of that in the face of the sex abuse debacle of the church itself, still to be resolved, never monitored, and totally closed to outside investigation.

The question is, Where has all this energy for empirical destruction come from in a church now projecting its own serious problems with sexual issues onto everything that moves?

In his new book, *Pius XII: The Hound of Hitler* [1], noted historian Gerard Noel traces the history of this pope's "Great Design." The material starts with the rise of the young canon lawyer Eugenio Pacelli to a position of power in the Vatican. It winds its way through Pacelli's election as Pius XII and the suppression by Pacelli himself of Germany's Catholic Centre Party and even Catholic social action groups in pre-WWII Germany, the only bodies in Germany strong enough to have checked the rise of Nazism. It concludes with the rise of another man, Adolf Hitler, whose reach for power matched his own but whose rise his very Concordats assured.

Pacelli rose to power, Noel explains, on the arm of a canon law degree in a church still smarting from the loss of the Papal States and the consequent unification of Italy. Pacelli dreamed of using a system of Concordats -- particular legal agreements with the major powers in Europe -- to restore the quasi-imperial power that went with the temporal power and wealth the Papal States had assured. Pacelli's life goal became the centralization of the church, the control of all its organizations. Under Pacelli, law became the power of the church; the Gospel, its victim.

For the first time in history, the Vatican took sole control of episcopal appointments, extended "infallibility" to "definitive" statements like encyclicals and gave the pope the right to declare on universal issues without the advice and consent of episcopal conferences, synods or councils. It was a recipe for monarchical control. And it worked.

Now, as a result, bishops are cut out of common cloth. They are chosen to be what the Vatican wants rather than what the culture or the people need. They are an arm of the Vatican rather than the voice of the flock in dialogue with the Vatican.

Have no doubt about it: Such equilibrium might be necessary, but it is also difficult to achieve. How does any international organization, in fact, preserve its values in such a disparate universal situation? Especially at such a distance from center? Given the multiple cultures? In the light of varying systems in which they themselves are embedded?

But isn't that exactly why a nation's bishops must have a heart for the national culture and tradition and values

and respect for the workings of the society itself in which we are attempting to evangelize?

The American tradition comes out of a commitment to freedom of speech, freedom of thought and democratic participation in the political process, which, admittedly, the Vatican has always suspected; indeed, has never liked. To ask Americans to take on not simply a European or Eastern European or Asian or African approach to "obedience" or governance or women, but a medieval one at that, is asking for what no law can provide. It is easy, of course, to force obedience; but, never doubt, it is impossible to force belief.

The effects here are beginning to show, as they did in Pacelli's Europe. The second-largest religious denomination in the United States, after Catholic, is now ex-Catholic.

The pope wants a smaller, purer church, we're told. Apparently that's what they wanted after the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, as well. And they got it. They lost half of Europe. They are now losing large segments of South America. The Irish Church is listing. Only 5 percent of infants born in Europe are now baptized. And the United States, once the largest church-going country in the world, in the light of the sex abuse scandal, is teetering, as well.

From where I stand, it seems that law isn't working.

Maybe the Vatican needs to go back to the approach of the loving John XXIII or the patient Paul VI.

Maybe we ought to try the Gospel again, the one that understands people who lift their work animals out of a ditch on the sabbath, or get caught in adultery, or are shunned because of their leprosy, or decide that circumcision is only one culture's sign of commitment, not theirs, or are the wrong sex, as was the Woman at the Well, to preach the Word of God. Let's try again the one that doesn't use investigations or intimidation or silencing or excommunications for the sake of control rather than make compassion the mark of the church. As they have, for instance, with bishops caught between two different sets of law -- civil law and canon law -- in the sex abuse scandal.

The results cannot possibly be worse than the ones we're getting. But one thing's clear. I know my own problem now: I was a Girl Scout.

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/Pius-XII-The-Hound-Hitler/dp/1847063551