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Typecasting bishops as 'right-wing' is futile

by Colman McCarthy

COLUMN

Let's all get mad at the bishops. They're getting out of hand, aren't they?

Starting at the top, we had Cardinal Donald Wuerl, archbishop of Washington, hashing it out with Georgetown University for hosting Kathleen Sebelius during graduation week. He found it "shocking" that students would be exposed to the views of the Catholic secretary of Health and Human Services, the department behind the federal mandate for employers to provide insurance for contraceptives.

On the same front, bishops from 13 dioceses filed suit against the Obama administration for its Affordable Health Care Act. The hierarchy has an ally in Mitt Romney, who pledged to kill the mandate if he becomes president -- unless the Supreme Court does it first.

An archbishop in Seattle is calling on his flock to sign petitions to overthrow Washington's new law sanctioning same-sex marriage. In Madison, Wis., a bishop is threatening to deny sacraments to Catholics protesting the closing of their parish school and ouster of a beloved pastor. The bishop of Peoria, Ill., called on the faithful to oppose President Barack Obama and "his radical, pro-abortion and extreme secularist agenda."

These stories are not new to *NCR* readers. Its well-crafted editorials and in-depth reporting have long been scything through the thick underbrush of ecclesial power.

To my question above, aren't the bishops getting out of hand, I wish I could join the Catholic left and say yes, way out of hand. I can't. And I'm not mad at the bishops. The prelates, like diligent laborers, are doing their jobs: sticking to the rules and collaring rule-breakers.

The liberal wing of the church won't accept that Roman Catholicism is a centralized membership organization. Male-centered, male-run, undemocratic, authoritarian, secretive, not media-friendly -- do popes stage press conferences? -- church leaders require members to heed the rules: the doctrines, dogmas, edicts and teachings of the organizational church. Belonging to it is akin to membership in any group, from the Shriners and Elks to the Church of What's Happening Now.

Liberal American Catholics, flexuous, accept some rules and scotch others. Obtusely, they refuse to understand that church politics differs from American electoral politics. Bishops and cardinals are appointed. Members of Congress are voted into power. Popes have no term limits, presidents do. No Freedom of Information Act assures transparency when reporters have yens for sniffing out Vatican secrets. Churchmen are accountable to the Vatican, politicians to voters and bankrolling lobbyists.

Typecasting bishops as "right-wing" is futile, suggesting as it does that the church has "left-wing" bishops ready to take over and throw the bums out. Occasionally a lefty bishop does emerge -- Walter Sullivan of Richmond, Va., is one, Tom Gumbleton of Detroit another -- but their liberal views are taken as anything but divinely inspired by fellow prelates. Portraying the hierarchy as a cabal of stonewallers because they won't conform to liberals' demands for collegiality doesn't have a prayer of persuading anyone who understands the meaning of membership and rules. I clapped with reverential applause when bishops instructed John Kerry, Patrick Kennedy and other Catholic pro-choice politicians either toe the line or get out of the Communion line.

A recent full-page ad in *The Washington Post* bought by the Freedom from Religion Foundation was titled "It's Time to Quit the Catholic Church": "If you think you can change the church from within -- get it to lighten up on birth control, gay rights, marriage equality, embryonic stem-cell research -- you're deluding yourself. By remaining a 'good Catholic,' you're doing 'bad' to women's rights. You're an enabler. And it's got to stop."

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The ad is a tad late. The quitting has been happening. The Pew Research Center estimates that 30 million Americans are former Catholics. For every person joining, four are leaving. The joiners are now in the pews with fellow Catholics Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum, Antonin Scalia, John Roberts, Clarence Thomas, Jeb Bush and Pat Buchanan. It's a safe assumption that these luminous members agree with their bishops, that the power of rules needs to be twinned with the rules of power.

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