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Contra Keller

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

It seems that Bill Keller's op-ed in the *New York Times* has created more of a stir than I had anticipated and, consequently, must be answered not ignored.

I do not know Mr. Keller. He may have once harbored grandiose ambitions for his understanding of Vatican II. He may have been treated shabbily by a priest or bishop. (Who hasn't?) He may have been poorly catechized. Such questions come naturally to a pastor, and I wish Keller and everyone always had the kind of pastor who could apply balm to troubled souls.

But, Keller has put forth his argument, such as it is, as an assertion. He is pronouncing himself on ideas, not experience, and so we can assess his ideas no matter what experiences he has had. Are they true? Do those ideas show a basic grasp of history and, in this case, theology? Could the type of claims Keller makes be made, say, about economics or geo-physics, and stand up to scrutiny? Sadly, the answer to all these questions is undoubtedly negative.

For example, Keller writes, "Indeed, the church's 1960s effort to engage the modern world is now regarded in the current Curia as part of an era of degenerate individualism? Woodstock, Stonewall, Vatican II? that is blamed for all kinds of deviant outcomes, including the scandal of priests who can't keep it in their cassocks." This is a very curious sentence. Take the three examples of "degenerate individualism" Keller cites: Woodstock, Stonewall and Vatican II. Permit me to ask Mr. Keller: Which one of these three is not like the other two? Was there ressourcement theology at work in the fields at Woodstock? Did Stonewall entail reflection, deep reflection, upon the meaning of an event two thousand years ago?

And, seeing as newspapers, including opinion columns, are supposed to be at least broadly linked to facts, where is the evidence for the claim that the "current Curia" has turned its back on Vatican II? It is

undoubtedly true that the Second Vatican Council, like the Council of Trent, unleashed some centrifugal forces and that today, like the period fifty or actually closer to one hundred years after Trent, we are seeing the emergence of centripetal forces. It is true that the early historical accounts of Vatican II, starting with the reporting of Xavier Rynne in the pages of the New Yorker and on through the work of the Bologna school, provided an understanding of the Council's work that was, shall we say, open-ended, in ways that the Council was not open-ended. This is crucial: It is true that some Catholic conservatives have noted that Pope Benedict, in his Address to the Curia in 2005, called out the Bologna school and its hermeneutic of discontinuity regarding Vatican II, the idea that everything was new under the sun. But, then some of those same conservatives put words in Benedict's mouth. Benedict did NOT call for a hermeneutic of continuity, as George Weigel and others have claimed, but for a hermeneutic of reform, which includes elements of both continuity and discontinuity. This call for a hermeneutic of reform is, to my mind, another way of issuing a call for unity insofar as the commonplace definition of a Catholic "liberal" is someone who emphasizes the points of discontinuity between the post-conciliar Church and the pre-conciliar Church and a good working definition of a Catholic conservative is someone who emphasizes the continuity between pre-and post-conciliar times.

I call on Mr. Keller "and any other takers" to produce a shred of evidence that Pope Benedict XVI has departed from the decrees of Vatican II? He may not harken to the ideas of those who have placed their own ambitions on the conciliar texts. He may not indulge certain tendentious readings "of the left or the right" regarding the conciliar texts. But, never, not once, have I ever read a sentence from Pope Benedict's mouth or from his pen that is at odds with the actual Vatican Council. If Keller is aware of such a quote or comment, let him produce it. Keller reminds me of the character Danny Ocean, played by George Clooney in the movie "Ocean's Eleven," who, when asked about who is behind the robbery at the casino says, "I know a guy?." Keller knows a guy who told him Benedict, in spite of all his obvious and repeated ecclesiological understandings to the contrary, was and is trying to overturn the Second Vatican Council.

Of course, equating the coarse rhetoric of a blowhard like Bill Donohue with the careful theology of a scholar like Pope Benedict XVI is offensive in the extreme. Keller should know better even if Donohue does not.

What is most troubling about Keller's essay, to me at least, is this. In endorsing Bill Donohue's call for disenchanting Catholics to leave the Church, Keller writes. "If you are not getting the spiritual sustenance you need, if you are uneasy being part of an institution out of step with your conscience, then go." This is the view of religion found in the heart of someone who is comfortable understanding himself primarily as a consumer. Choosing a religion is like choosing a vacuum cleaner: If you don't like the one you have, get a different one. And, Keller's understanding of conscience and its relationship to the church is decidedly non-Catholic. Conscience, in literature as well as theology, "pricks" the human heart, conscience does not encourage the human heart to get comfortable. Conscience, for the Catholic at least, is the voice of God speaking to us in moments of concrete moral decision-making, urging us to do the right thing. Conscience is the little good angel on the right shoulder of a person faced with a moral choice, counteracting the arguments of the little devil on the left shoulder. Conscience is not self-assertion. Conscience is not about getting comfortable. Keller's conscience is the conscience of the self-satisfied and the intellectually lazy. It is no conscience at all. It is whim. It is unworthy of a religion and only Keller and his colleagues at the New York Times, the epitome of self-satisfaction, can fail to see this.

I do not subscribe to the belief that a smaller, purer Church is a better Church. I have long loved the James Joyce line about Catholicism meaning "here comes everybody." But, of course, Joyce's line assumes that "everybody" is coming to a common place, and that they are moving towards that place, that center. Joyce's sentiment undoubtedly serves as a check to the "smaller is better" crowd but it also serves as a check to those who think discipleship does not involve movement, centripetal movement, of the kind we

can, I think, fairly associate with the current and previous pontificates. But, for Keller, there is no need to leave the Church. He has become a Consumer not a Catholic. His understanding of truth is whatever suits him and his friends and any contrary truths are too inconvenient to be paid any heed. Keller does not engage the serious intellectual and moral challenges found in Pope Benedict's writings, he just dismisses them and mis-characterizes them. Keller may think that Pope Benedict XVI lumps Vatican II with Stonewall and Woodstock, just as some people may think they are Superman. It is a delusion, not even ranking the noble title "opinion." Why such stuff gets published in the pages of the New York Times tells you more about the Times than it does about the Church today. I do not know if Keller should be ashamed of this sloppy piece of prose. I do know he should be embarrassed.

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