

Fr. Flannery's grasp of theology better than that of his silencers

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jan. 25, 2013 | Bulletins from the Human Side

The Irish Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery [refuses to meet](#) [1] the Vatican demand that he affirm, among other things, that "Christ instituted the church with a permanent hierarchical structure and that bishops are divinely appointed successors to the apostles."

Flannery, a popular preacher and writer, [told *The New York Times*](#) [2] he has been "writing thought-provoking articles and books for decades without hindrance" and that the campaign against him "is being orchestrated by a secretive body that refuses to meet me. Surely I should at least be allowed to explain my views to my accusers."

Flannery also organized the Association of Catholic Priests in 2009 to articulate the views of rank-and-file members of the clergy, the *Times* reports. Flannery may have gotten himself investigated as much for giving Irish priests a voice as for using his own in challenging old-fashioned formulations with his well-informed knowledge of theology and history.

If Father Flannery is being asked to endorse the notion that Jesus established the hierarchical church and that the bishops are the divinely appointed successors of the apostles, one might be more concerned about how firm a grasp his accusers have on modern theology.

This incident is an early 21st-century reprise of the early 20th-century Roman worldwide crackdown on priests who were keeping up with the new advances in theological and scriptural studies. All priests were forced to take the [Oath Against Modernism](#) [3], the vague catch-all phrase that supposedly summarized the heresies rampant in the new learning.

In the United States, as historian Michael Gannon has shown in his work on the American priesthood before and after the modernist condemnation, committees of vigilance were set up to monitor and report on what priests were reading. The first American theological journal, the *New York Review*, was suppressed in 1909, and another did not appear until [Theological Studies](#) [4] in 1940. The chaplain of the police department replaced the progressive rector of New York's St. Joseph's Seminary.

The situation is much different now, and while the Flannery condemnation is remarkable enough in itself, it should be recognized as a harbinger of the kind of problem that sure-of-their-infallibility Vatican authorities will encounter in their relationships with the rising generation of theological scholars, most of whom are laymen and women who will not accept condemnations such as that now imposed on Father Flannery.

Even well-educated Catholics know as much or more theology than these veiled Roman enforcers. That also goes for the American bishops, who are wonderful men in general but who are unprepared for theological conversations with their people. One of the reasons the bishops have difficulty in communicating effectively with ordinary Catholics arises from their discomfort and/or inability to discuss theological issues with them.

Consider just two of those that Flannery is being forced to sign off on if he wants to continue his work: Christ's having established the church in hierarchical form and the assertion, employed constantly by bishops to

legitimate their authority, that they are the direct descendants of the apostles.

If anything, Christ called together a college of apostles, and the collegiality to which Vatican II returned is a far better image than the hierarchical form that was adopted from the hierarchical cosmological view of the universe and expressed in secular kingdoms, including the Roman Empire, whose provinces and proconsuls provided the model for laying out the governance of the church.

How many bishops have studied the work of one of America's foremost sacramental theologians, Franciscan Fr. Kenan Osborne, who writes in his book *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (Paulist Press) that "the college of bishops is not simply the sum of individual bishops ... It is fundamentally the college of bishops which is the successor of the 'College of the Apostles.' "

In other words, the succession is a function of the collegiality that Pope John Paul II so energetically suppressed with the help of the present pope when he was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It is not related to the hierarchical form the pope is trying to revive throughout the church.

Flannery's condemnation is an augury of the deepening estrangement that will take place if the Vatican does not respect the growing theological understanding of its members. The bishops are sincere in wanting to establish better channels of communication with their people. The best thing they can do to achieve that is to master the language of modern theological and scriptural studies that so many Catholics understand better than they do right now.

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[2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/20/world/europe/priest-is-planning-to-defy-vaticans-orders-to-stay-quiet.html>

[3] <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10moath.htm>

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