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Bruni & Wuerl

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

This weekend brought two very different op-eds, one in the New York Times and the other in the Washington Post, both of which dealt with the Catholic Church. Mr. Frank Bruni penned the column in the Times which you can read by clicking [here](#), and Cardinal Donald Wuerl wrote the op-ed in the Post, which you can read by clicking [here](#).

Mr. Bruni, who earned his prime journalistic real estate on the Times' op-ed page on the strength of his skills as a restaurant critic, used his column to castigate "an institution," the contemporary Catholic Church and what he terms its arrogance. He uses a forthcoming book by Garry Wills, which has not yet been published and which I have not read, to make his case.

Whenever someone these days talks about "the institutional Church," I cringe. I understand what they mean, and spend many of my waking hours pondering the culture of this organization which is the Church. But, the phrase generally comes from someone who seems to think there is some alternate Church than the one we have, a "Church of the People" versus "the institutional Church," or the primitive Church versus the contemporary Church, or a spiritualized Church without the all too human failings of the Church we know. Alas, have these people read the Scriptures in which, time and again, the apostles show themselves to be clueless and worse? Are they unfamiliar with the fact that, as Msgr. John Tracy Ellis used to say, and as Cardinal Dolan quoted Ellis to the bishops in his first speech as head of the USCCB, "the bride of Christ has many warts"? Yet, somehow, through all the failings of countless popes, the indiscretions and sins of countless priests, the infidelity and credulity of countless laity, there she is, the Church, still getting on through the ages and fulfilling her vital role of providing the place where we human beings can encounter the Risen Lord.

I make no apologies for the conduct of Cardinal Roger Mahony, which Bruni discusses, regarding the cardinal's treatment of those clergy who sexually abused children. It was wrong. Cardinal Mahony has admitted it was wrong. And, Bruni is right to diagnose part of the essential problem in the response of many, many hierarchs to the clergy sex abuse crisis: hubris. What he is wrong to do is to link that to things that have nothing to do with it, such as the case of Fr. Tony Flannery, the Irish priest who seems to be everyone's favorite dissident du jour. I wonder, really, when Fr. Flannery took his oath of obedience, did he think it only extended to issues on which he would be in agreement with his superiors? And, when Fr. Flannery says the actions taken against him remind him of the Inquisition, I should like to see the rack that was used against him. I am sorry but the problem with the Inquisition was that it tortured people, and just so violated the bonds of charity. (And, I will bet any amount of money that Mr. Bruni is unclear on the difference between the Spanish Inquisition and the Roman, which is an important difference.) But, last time I checked, there are no more torture chambers, nor are there any Swiss Guards at the airport.

There is no coercion whatsoever. There is a call to fidelity. It is a braver man than I who would say, "I stand against hundreds of years of tradition and the current teaching authority of the Catholic Church, expressed in its most solemn form, to insist that I am right and they are wrong." If Fr. Flannery's conscience compels him to say that, he is free to do so. He is not free to do so in the name of the Church. I confess I find the actions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith often clumsy and counter-productive, but I also think that someone in the Church must be charged with the admittedly thankless task of reminding us that just because a Catholic has a thought, doesn't mean it is a Catholic thought that has been had.

Bruni writes that "the new book by Wills, a Pulitzer Prize winner who has written extensively about Christianity and the church, says that at the start, Christianity not only didn't have priests but opposed them. The priesthood was a subsequent tweak, and the same goes for the all-male, celibate nature of the Roman Catholic clergy and the autocratic hierarchy that this clergy inhabits, an unresponsive government whose subjects "the laity" have a limited say." Of course, Wills earned his Pulitzer for a book about Gettysburg, not about Gelasius. But, surely Wills understands, even if Bruni does not, that doctrine develops over time. Wills wrote a fairly decent, albeit brief, biography of St. Augustine, in which he discussed how Augustine came to discern the doctrine of original sin, which was not discerned in thin air, but in the tradition, where it was not yet explicit, certainly no one had used the phrase or explained the concept, but it was there. So, why is it wrong for the Church's understanding of the priesthood to develop but not its understanding of sin? The Church also, in Augustine's time and for many centuries, accepted the enslavement of human beings but, mercifully, we now see that it was wrong to accept such a cruel, inhuman institution, and our moral doctrine evolved to reject it. One may object to this or that development of Christian doctrine, but not on the ground that it is a development. And, is there not

something a little bit strange about all these 21st century champions of 1st century Christian practices who seem to discern in that first Christian century a society that looks completely compatible with the more found today on the Upper West Side?

This fascination with primitivism among liberals is bizarre to me. Yes, the doings of the early church are interesting, but they are not necessarily of doctrinal significance. We are Catholics, after all, not Baptists. My liberal friends often like to quote these words of Cardinal Newman: "to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often," but they forget the words that precede it:

It is indeed sometimes said that the stream is clearest near the spring. Whatever use may fairly be made of this image, it does not apply to the history of a philosophy or belief, which on the contrary is more equable, and purer, and stronger, when its bed has become deep, and broad, and full. It necessarily rises out of an existing state of things, and for a time savours of the soil. Its vital element needs disengaging from what is foreign and temporary, and is employed in efforts after freedom which become more vigorous and hopeful as its years increase. Its beginnings are no measure of its capabilities, nor of its scope. At first no one knows what it is, or what it is worth. It remains perhaps for a time quiescent; it tries, as it were, its limbs, and proves the ground under it, and feels its way. From time to time it makes essays which fail, and are in consequence abandoned. It seems in suspense which way to go; it wavers, and at length strikes out in one definite direction. In time it enters upon strange territory; points of controversy alter their bearing; parties rise and around it; dangers and hopes appear in new relations; and old principles reappear under new forms. It changes with them in order to remain the same. In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.

Enough for primitivism.

Cardinal Wuerl's article is positively Newmanesque, and that is not an assignation I confer lightly. The cardinal's op-ed is essentially a defense of the fact that the Catholic Church is dogmatic, and happily so. "The church is dogmatic, and that is good" even if it means that the church is a sign of contradiction and the object of animus and disdain. Newman, too, knew something about becoming an object of animus and disdain, and he famously stated, "From the age of fifteen, dogma has been the central principle of my religion: I know no other religion; I cannot enter into the idea of any other sort of religion; religion, as a mere sentiment, is to me a dream and a mockery." I second that judgment, although it took me later than fifteen to realize it. But, once realized, it changes everything, as I have been writing often and in different contexts, these past few months. Regular readers will recall my "To Hell With It" series.

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After noting all the various ministries of the Church, Wuerl writes, "The Church does not do these things for money or profit or because they're nice to do. When the Church treats the sick and the injured, or feeds the hungry, or teaches, or provides assistance to those in need, it does so as an answer to the call made by Jesus Christ. We are obligated to do these and other works of mercy and to give voice to moral truth because He asks us to." Obligations, and being obedient to them, flows naturally, better to say supernaturally, from our belief that Christ is Risen. Otherwise, why would anyone care what Jesus taught? Here is the New Evangelization, a call to remember that the works of the Church are rooted not in any do-gooder impulse, but in a divine mandate and a divine call.

Mr. Bruni should stick with evaluating tortellini and leave the theology to Cardinal Wuerl.

Note to Readers: I need to be at the bus stop at 6:40 a.m. to get to the airport and fly to Denver for my

debate tonight with Father Sirico. I will not get to my hotel room until 2 p.m. Denver time, but will post some links then. In the meantime, a happy Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas to one and all. Hug a Dominican today!

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