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The NYTimes' Anti-RC Blinders

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Distinctly Catholic

The New York Times has a special place in our culture. The newspaper is read by all the major figures in government, finance and culture. Its articles enter mainstream European opinion direct or via the International Herald Tribune. It even makes cameos in popular culture, such as the movie *Julia & Julie* when Julie's Mom calls and says, "Oh, my God, you're in the New York Times!"

So, it is distressing that the Times seems to have it in for the Catholic Church. Bad enough that they lend their op-ed pages to Maureen Dowd, Frank Bruni, Garry Wills and John Patrick Shanley for their diatribes. But, what to make of an article last week by Rachel Donadio about Pope Benedict's resignation?

It is always strange to me that a journalist would mostly quote other journalists in a news article. I know that covering the Church is frustrating. Church officials do not like to go on the record. But, better to have church officials on background than an Italian journalist on the record, no? Donadio has some quotes from the noted professor Eamon Duffy, and a comment from Father Federico Lombardi at a press conference, but mostly Donadio's article quotes journalists who, like her, cover the Vatican. This is strange.

Also strange is the way she casts certain events in the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI in a somewhat sinister light. She writes about the establishment of the Anglican ordinariate: "The Vatican official then in charge of the church's relations with Anglicans, Cardinal Walter Kasper, said he had not been informed of the new structure, which had been announced in an impromptu news conference by a different Vatican office when he was out of town." This leaves the impression that Cardinal Kasper was entirely in the dark about the establishment of the new ordinariate. It is true that the ordinariate was erected under the auspices of a different curial department, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). But,

mightn't Donadio have noted that Cardinal Kasper is a voting member of CDF. He may not have been up to speed on some of the particulars. Or, he may have had a different reason for distancing himself from the decision. None of this makes it into Donadio's article. The reader is left with the impression that the CDF pulled a fast one. Nothing in the Vatican is fast.

If you asked Pope Benedict to cite the particular achievements in his pontificate, I suspect the establishment of the Anglican ordinariate would be high on the list. Of course, the fact that the Pope was responding to the pleas of Anglicans is not mentioned. Of course, the fact that, in this instance, Pope Benedict embraced diversity, allowing the Anglicans to retain particular liturgical practices and texts, is not mentioned. Diversity is only a value in certain circles when it extends to those who agree with them, not when it extends to traditionally minded Anglicans. Of course, the fact that the ordinariate gave formal structure to a pattern of conversion, and the advancement of Christian unity that goes back to the Oxford Movement, that is not mentioned.

Donadio's treatment of Pope Benedict's attempt to deal with the culture of the curia, and specifically its tolerance for corruption and horror of transparency is similarly telling. To be clear, Pope Benedict inherited a mess. Key, powerful curial officials had wielded a great deal of power during Pope John Paul II's long physical decline. Some of them were corrupt, such as Cardinal Angelo Sodano whom, according to reporting published here at NCR by Jason Berry, fought fiercely to protect serial pedophile Fr. Maciel of the Legionaries of Christ and who also received large sums of cash from the same. When Benedict became pope, he put men of known moral probity into positions of influence. There was great opposition to Benedict's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, in part because he was not drawn from the diplomatic corps of the Holy See. When Bertone announced he hoped to be a "pastoral Secretary of State," there were snickers among the nuncios. To them, this was akin to suggesting one would be a "pastoral Latin teacher." The job needed to be done, and whether it was done pastorally or not did not matter. But, Benedict and Bertone saw moral corruption and tried to right it. They were not entirely successful, this is evident. But, Donadio and other journalists should be mindful of who is trashing Bertone and what their interest might be. If the critic's patron was Sodano, I would take their comments with a deep reservoir of skepticism.

Donadio certainly could have explained how these attempts at reform played out, how they were met with skepticism and suspicion. The Washington Post had a front page story yesterday that examined all the documentary evidence from the Vatileaks controversy and told the tale. No, Donadio seems intent on using the effort to clean up the curia only as yet another point of indictment of Benedict. She writes, "A weak manager further weakened by age" the Vatican said for the first time on Tuesday that the pope had a pacemaker? Benedict apparently no longer felt equal to the task of governing an institution that had lacked a strong leader for over a decade, ever since John Paul II began a slow descent into Parkinson's disease.? Not all managers are weak simply because they cannot turn a large, cumbersome and exceedingly tradition-bound organization in eight years. And, couldn't Donadio allow one of her journalist sources to put in a good word for Benedict for at least trying to clean things up? Instead, she makes it seem as if Benedict was a part of the problem. Maybe he could have been more hands on. Maybe a virtuous personality is less important in certain key jobs than competence. But, maybe too, he saw his job differently and brought a different set of priorities to it.

This leads to the narrative that is most disturbing to me, and it is found not only in Donadio's articles but elsewhere too. It is the idea that the principal job of a pope is to manage the Vatican. It seems to me that the principal job of the Pope is to lead the Church in prayer and to proclaim the teachings of the Church. Running the shop is important because it facilitates these goals, not as an end in itself. It makes me nuts when someone criticizes the Church by saying, "You couldn't run a business that way." Well, ya know, the Church is not a business.

Donadio has her narrative: This hapless pontiff is resigning because he just can't take it anymore, the scandals were too much for him and, because he appointed inept officials, they only added to the scandals. Regensburg and the removal of Archbishop Vigano, it's all the same. But, I have a different narrative. I have no inside information but I think Pope Benedict took his role as leading the Church at prayer really seriously, and the reason he chose this moment to resign was not because scandals from a year ago finally got to him but because the prospect of Holy Week was too much. Major liturgies, day after day, two on Holy Thursday, two on Good Friday, and the Great Vigil of Easter followed early next morning by another Mass. Running to St. John Lateran for the Mass of the Lord's Supper and to the Colosseum for the Stations of the Cross. It was the specter of his increasingly frail voice being unable to do what he is best at, preaching the Word of God, this I suspect led him to choose this moment to step aside. Maybe Donadio can check with her journalist friends to test my theory. Really, can't the Times do better?

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