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Firing of gay teacher shows sclerotic leadership cannot survive

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NCR Today

There was a story in *The New York Times* Monday that's making the rounds on email and Facebook. It's not breaking news, just a feature story about something that happened two months ago.

It's about Carla Hale, a teacher in a Catholic high school in Columbus, Ohio, who was fired from her job after 18 years when a death notice for her mother included the name of Carla's partner, Julie. An anonymous letter to the Diocese of Columbus was all it took for Carla to be immediately terminated for having a "spousal relationship" that "violates the moral laws of the Catholic Church."

Frank Bruni, the writer of the story, spent time in Carla's house and shared in her quiet grief.

This is of course no isolated incident. It is something that's been happening all over the country as gays are weeded out of Catholic rectories, schools and churches, often on the basis of one anonymous letter or phone call. That's all it takes.

Catholics leave the church because of such stiff-necked intransigence, just as they have been leaving for decades now because of the church's refusal to reconsider or even talk about its positions on artificial contraception, women priests, in vitro fertilization, re-marriage after divorce, abortion, the priest abuse scandal and the failure of the hierarchy to deal with it, and a dozen other hot button issues.

This is an old, old church which has become crippled and sclerotic due to arrogance at the top and a refusal to admit that the experiences of real people in the real world might have anything to contribute. It's a punitive, angry, defensive, male-run church -- certain of its positions, hiding behind pillars of absolute authority and infallibility.

This is not the church that Vatican II envisioned, a participative, collegial, outward-looking church, more concerned with the needs of the whole world than with its self-image of supremacy. But the policies of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI departed from such a broad, generous approach in favor of smaller, more loyal, more obedient church.

And that is just the sort of church that fires school teachers on the basis of anonymous letters.

Nevertheless, despair is not an option. We have a new pope whose ideas seem far more in line with those of Pope John XXIII than with those of our recent pontiffs. We have new approaches to theology -- much of it coming from women theologians, scholars and activists -- that present the Scriptures and doctrines of the church in a new light.

Most importantly, we have a significant part of the laity (in this country and others) that share the common sense of the faithful and surely must be near the limits of toleration.

Incidentally, Carla Hale, the teacher who was fired is not a Catholic. She is a Methodist, but even that did not preserve her from the decree of an imperial church.

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