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The envelope, please, for the 2013 Clericus Maximus Award

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

Although they won't remember the winners six months from now, Americans are abuzz about who will win the Super Bowl and the Academy Awards. It is also time to identify the candidates for the Monsignor Moron Award that, because that title insults morons, is now known as the Clericus Maximus Prize.

It goes to the bishop or priest who in his life and ministry best displays the characteristics of the ingrained cleric, the one who is sure of divine inspiration for his every judgment and is prepared to accept any privilege from being mother's favorite son to being the gleaming apple in everyone else's eye. The motto of the Clericus Maximus might be: "Not to serve but to be served."

Good priests and bishops far outnumber them, helping us bear our daily burdens while seeking little, if anything, for themselves. The inveterate cleric is a burden in himself, always tugging on us such as a Thanksgiving Day parade balloon that floats above us, filled with hot air.

Good priests never look for awards and, perversely enough in the clerical culture universe, do not receive many. Like the aged nuns who taught selflessly and nearly anonymously all their lives, these servants of the People of God only get into the papers when their obituaries are printed.

The situation is far different for Clericus Maximus, who sees to it that his image and his lengthy, cure-for-insomnia letters dominate his diocesan newspaper. Clericus Maximus also has a gift for saying startlingly dumb things that appear in the media regularly, to the embarrassment of ordinary Catholics. Over the last decade, many of these statements have concerned the clerical sex abuse scandal, a subject our first nominee has handled as if it had come, like the flu, attacking the church from the outside rather than from inside its clerical culture.

Archbishop John Nienstedt of St. Paul-Minneapolis is in the running because of his seeming reluctance to issue the names of priests who are sex offenders. He seems to share the mindset of Fr. Reginald Whitt, a canon law professor at the University of St. Thomas, who when the scandal broke in 2002, said, "These (sex abusers) are criminals, but they are our criminals and we can't lose them. Indeed, the bishops have a duty to try to save them." Michael Skiendzielewski, a commenter at MN Progressive Project, asks if it is not true that "the bishops have a duty to try to save the CHILDREN ABUSED and INNOCENT CHILDREN FROM THE RISK OF ABUSE?"

Archbishop Nienstedt has been trying to regain the trust of his people, even though he allowed Fr. Clarence Vavra to continue in ministry through 2003 despite "admitting that ... he tried to rape a preteen boy during the 1970s on a South Dakota Indian reservation," according to Brian Roewe in *NCR*. Other unpleasant information has also surfaced, but the archbishop has now shifted ground several times explaining why he cannot release the names of abusive priests. Nienstedt has, as Saul Bellow once told me about certain women, "more holds than a professional wrestler."

Then there is Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wisc., famous among other things for firing pastoral associate Ruth Kolpack after admitting he had read only "bits and pieces" of her master's thesis, condemning her writings about Jesus as "off base." He also demanded a loyalty oath from her and that she renounce her scholarly paper.

Downstate Illinois, however, is the home field of the AAA league for clerics aspiring to the major leagues of succeeding, for example, to the archdiocese of Chicago from which Cardinal Francis George is scheduled soon to retire.

Among these candidates for the Clericus Maximus Award, we find Daniel Jenky, the bishop of Peoria, Ill. If you want to know how high clericalism plays in Peoria, as the old phrase goes, consult the fiercely bearded bishop's comparison of President Barack Obama's health care policies to the oppressive actions of Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin. When his remarks caused people to protest, diocesan chancellor Patricia Gibson defended Jenky, saying he "offered historical context and comparisons as a means to prevent a repetition of historical attacks upon the Catholic Church and other religions."

However, the front-runner for the award remains Bishop Thomas John Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., who warned voters of the possible consequences of casting ballots for the Democratic ticket in 2012. "A vote for a candidate who promotes actions or behaviors that are intrinsically evil and gravely sinful makes you morally complicit and places the eternal salvation of your own soul in serious jeopardy," he wrote in a column in his diocesan paper.

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Paprocki, whose office is decorated with hockey memorabilia, including his own episcopally crested helmet, may have topped himself this year. According to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Paprocki attacked the

state legislature as it debated and ultimately passed a same-sex marriage law, saying it "comes from the devil and should be condemned as such." Paprocki announced he would offer prayers of supplication and exorcism "in reparation for the sin of same-sex marriage."

Paprocki may have made other, more conciliatory approaches to the legislators, but he has not said this publicly and it has not been reported. He has condemned by name several Catholic legislators involved with the bill. He has advertised himself as super-orthodox cleric who knows that such a reputation might help him advance to higher places in the church.

The chief characteristic of the Clericus Maximus is that he is so busy looking down at his people that he fails to stand with them when they are struggling with important moral issues. Paprocki, a Chicago native (and some believe he would love to return there as archbishop), and we may interpret his adolescent stunts as the clerical counterpart of meeting the challenges of becoming an Eagle Scout. That, of course, is unfair to Boy Scouts.

So as we slit open the envelope, our winner: Thomas John Paprocki. [A sentence was removed from this paragraph. See notes below for explanation.]

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

A note from Eugene Kennedy:

Bishop Paprocki has informed me that the story of his complaining to his brother about his leaving the priesthood having an impact on his career is untrue. Although I had checked this out with several Chicago priests who know the bishop, I believe that it is an urban legend and I should not have included it.

Bishop Paprocki also insists that he does not look forward to a return as archbishop of Chicago and is perfectly happy as bishop of Springfield. I am glad he is happy to be there, and while I regret the urban legend misinformation, I affirm his winning the Clericus Maximus Award.

Bishop Paprocki's letter:

Mr. Dennis Coday
Editor
National Catholic Reporter

Dear Mr. Coday:

Your contributor, Eugene Cullen Kennedy, is entitled to his opinion, but not to his false statements. In his "Bulletin from the Human Side" (December 12, 2013), Kennedy states that Bishop Thomas John Paprocki "remonstrated with his brother who left the priesthood for not thinking of the impact of his resignation, not on himself, but on [his] career." That is totally false. I have six brothers, none of whom has ever been ordained a priest. Thus, I have no brother who has ever left the priesthood nor with whom I have therefore "remonstrated" for doing so.

Kennedy also says, "Paprocki, a Chicago native, would love to return there as archbishop." If Kennedy would have bothered to ask me, I would have assured him that I am very happy in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, I love my people and my priests here, and I have no desire to go anywhere else.

Journalistic ethics normally requires writers to check out their facts before publishing them. Perhaps Kennedy's writing should then be considered more in the genre of fiction, but since he attributes his false

statements to "inside clerics" and not original sources, that means his idle speculations are more in the mode of gossip, which Pope Francis has repeatedly denounced as a "form of murder." At his St. Martha's Mass on May 18, 2013, Pope Francis spoke about how gossip by Christians is a "slap" to Jesus "in the person of his children." He returned to this theme on September 2, 2013, when he said, "Where there is God, there is no hate, envy or jealousy. Nor are there those who want to kill with gossip." Similarly, in his homily on September 13, 2013, Pope Francis said that "if we ever gossip, we are certainly persecutors and violent. . . . We ask for grace so that we and the entire Church may convert from the crime of gossip to love, to humility, to meekness, to docility, to the generosity of love towards our neighbor."

Best wishes for blessed Christmas.

Peace and blessings,

+Bishop Paprocki

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