

Judgment or Mercy in Montana

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 7, 2014 | Distinctly Catholic

Cotton Mather is alive and well and, apparently, serving as the Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Helena, Montana. Patrick Haggarty is the name of the superintendent and [he made and defended the decision](#) [1] to fire a Catholic school teacher who got pregnant out of wedlock. You expected the article to end with Haggarty announcing the woman would, henceforth, be made to wear a scarlet "A" upon her outer garments. "The Catholic moral teaching is that the sacrament of marriage is a holy union between a man and a woman," Haggarty said. "And we certainly believe and we teach our children who attend our schools about the sacrament of marriage. That's as old as our church. Not only do we teach that to the children kindergarten through 12th grade, but we're held to that standard as well."

Since reading about this case, I have read the [fine exposition of the issues published at Millennial](#) [2] by Meghan Clark, associate professor of theology at St. John's University and a fellow at Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies, where I am a visiting fellow as well. I wish to associate myself entirely with Clark's commentary, most especially her point that this action by the superintendent causes more scandal than does the fired teacher's unwed pregnancy.

We are now almost a year into the pontificate of Pope Francis. Every time he talks about the relationship of the moral law to the mission of the Church, he gets himself in trouble. Some people seem not to understand what he is after. This episode, I submit, perfectly demonstrates what the pope is after. Yes, as Superintendent Haggarty asserts, the Church teaches that sex should not occur outside of wedlock. Indeed, you do not need the inspiration of the Catholic faith to know that out-of-wedlock births are a thing to be avoided: They are a leading indicator of poverty. But, that is not all the Church teaches. As Clark points out, and as Pope Francis never tires of reminding us, the Church has more foundational teachings than our moral teachings, specifically, that our God is a God of mercy and compassion.

It is difficult for our modern, liberal culture to grasp how an institution like the Church can both proclaim fairly demanding moral teachings and be so quick to forgive the failure to live up to those teachings. (And by liberal here, I mean the kind of culture found in the modern West as opposed to a pre-Reformation, more organic culture.) Of course, the Master called us to be perfect even as our Heavenly Father is perfect, so we all fall short, no? But, in modern, liberal culture, this makes no sense. Today, as Cardinal Francis George has pointed out, everything is permitted but many things are never forgiven, which is the opposite of how the Church views it. Today, sympathy with human frailty is seen as hypocrisy. So, when the pope speaks about mercy, or, not to put too fine a point on it, when he baptizes a child conceived out of wedlock, the world thinks he is insulting the moral law. He is not. He is reminding us that the moral law is not the most defining thing about a Church that bears the name Christian, mercy is.

In the case in Montana, however, we are not concerned with trying to explain a different worldview to a media that sees the Church as opaque to begin with, we are talking about a school, a Catholic school. If ever there were an institution that should be able to use an incident like this to teach what the pope is teaching, a Catholic school should be that place. How difficult would it have been to use this fact "a woman has become pregnant out of

wedlock ? to teach the schoolchildren about how the Church can, as the Holy Father says, be a field hospital for the world of sinners. Here was a perfect opportunity to teach that, in the Catholic faith, we all fall down, and the measure of our faith is not the degree to which we sin or not, but the degree to which our sure hope in the Resurrection permits us the confidence in God's mercy to get up when we fall down, mindful we shall fall again, but to continue nonetheless down the path of discipleship. The script writes itself. No one should have trouble drafting a lesson plan for this lesson. You can turn to almost any page of the Gospel and find the kernel of this core of our faith. As I have noted before, this is why the Church requires exorcists to be men of great holiness, because the devil will show them their sins and tempt them to despair of their salvation. Holiness is not a life lived collecting good deeds. Holiness is trusting in God's promises.

A couple of weeks back [I wrote about a similar case in Seattle](#), [3] where a gay man was fired from a Catholic school when he contracted a civil marriage with his same-sex partner. There are differences and similarities between the two cases. But, in both cases, I think the key fact, one driven home brilliantly by Professor Clark, is that our Church tends to highlight violations of sexual norms more than other violations of the moral law, and that even a cursory reading of the Gospels does not warrant such highlighting. The Master is quick to forgive sins of the flesh. He rails against the proud and, specifically, the religiously proud. Jesus warns us against Cotton Mather Syndrome. Alas, such judgmentalism is part of the spiritual sensibility. Dear reader, if you look hard enough, you will find it within yourself too.

Final Point: Pope Francis constantly calls us to a culture of encounter. Here we discern a key to breaking through the cultural misunderstandings of the relationship of the Church's moral teachings to the Church's doctrinal assertion that God forgives even the greatest of sins and seeks the reconciliation of all. If we acknowledge the common fatherhood of God, then we must recognize the common brotherhood of each other. We are, by baptism, adopted sons and daughters of God and, just so, the Church is a family. This woman who made a mistake did not cease being a member of the family because of her mistake. Only in a culture of encounter, in a family, can one admonish in a way that has any persuasiveness. Was this not the point Cardinal O'Malley was making in his homily at the Pro-Life Vigil, when he focused on the woman caught in a crisis pregnancy and not just on any abstract rendering of the moral law? The Church is called first to love the sinner, and we are all sinners. There is, there must be, a way for the transgression of this woman in Montana to become a moment when the Catholic school teaches the faith in its fullness. That does not mean retracting one iota of our teaching on the sanctity of marriage. But, when the effort to defend that teaching turns us away from the yet more foundational teaching that God's mercy is vouchsafed to us already and always, and that the Church exists to bring that mercy to the world, then we may win the culture war, we may lose the culture war, but we have lost our way along the pathways of discipleship.

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Links:

[1] http://missoulian.com/news/local/unwed-butte-catholic-school-teacher-fired-over-pregnancy/article_94ad36f8-8dda-11e3-b82b-0019bb2963f4.html

[2] <http://millennialjournal.com/2014/02/06/truly-scandalous-fired-for-choosing-life/>

[3] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/same-sex-marriage-catholic-schools>