

# A dissent to ‘church of the Times’

*Occasionally, a guest contribution occupies this space. A recent column by Kenneth L. Woodward in the weekly Commonwealth struck me as timely and insightful. Given its length, the second part of the article will appear next week.*

The New York Times isn't fair. In its all-hands-on-deck drive to implicate the pope in diocesan cover-ups of abusive priests, the Times has relied on a steady stream of documents unearthed or supplied by Jeff Anderson, the nation's most aggressive litigator on behalf of clergy-abuse victims. Fairness dictates that the Times give Anderson at least a co-byline.

After all, it was really Anderson who “broke” the story March 25 about Father Lawrence Murphy and his abuse of 200 deaf children a half-century ago in Wisconsin. Reporter Laurie Goodstein says her article emerged from her own “inquiries,” but the piece was based on Anderson documents. Indeed, in its ongoing exercise in *J'accuse* journalism, the Times has adopted as its own Anderson's construal of what took place. Anderson is a persuasive fellow: back in 2002 he claimed that he had already won more than \$60 million in settlements from the church. But the really big money is in Rome, which is why Anderson is trying to haul the Vatican into U.S. federal court. The Times did not mention this in its story, of course, but if the paper can show malfeasance on the part of the pope, Anderson may get his biggest payday yet.

It's hard for a newspaper to climb in bed with a man like Anderson without making his cause its own. Does this mean that the Times is anti-Catholic? New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan thinks it is – he said so last October in response to an earlier series of stories on clergy abuse. Whatever one thinks of Dolan's accusation, clearly the Times considers sexual abuse committed by Catholic priests more newsworthy than abuse committed by other groups. An April 13 verdict against the Boy Scouts of America, which has struggled with the child-sexual-abuse issue for a century, did not merit page 1, above-the-fold treatment but rather a single paragraph deep inside the paper. A longer April 15 story about a Brown University student credibly accused of raping another student, an incident the university did not report to the police and arguably “covered up” at the request of powerful figures

in the Brown community, appeared on page 18.

No question, the Times's worldview is secularist and secularizing, and as such it rivals the Catholic worldview. But that is not unusual with newspapers. What makes the Times unique – and what any Catholic bishop ought to understand – is that it is not just the nation's self-appointed newspaper of record. It is, to paraphrase Chesterton, an institution with the soul of a church. And the church it most resembles in size, organization, internal culture and international reach is the Roman Catholic Church.

Like the Church of Rome, the Times is a global organization. Even in these reduced economic times, the newspaper's international network of news bureaus rivals the Vatican's diplomatic corps. The difference is that Times bureau chiefs are better paid and, in most capitals, more influential. A report from a papal nuncio ends up in a Vatican dossier, but a report from a Times correspondent is published around the world, often with immediate repercussions. With the advent of the Internet, stories from the Times can become other outlets' news in an ever-ramifying process of global cycling and recycling. That, of course, is exactly what happened with the Times piece on Father Murphy, the deceased Wisconsin child molester. The pope speaks twice a year *urbi et orbi* (to the city and to the world), but the Times does that every day.

Again like the Church of Rome, the Times exercises a powerful magisterium or teaching authority through its editorial board. There is no issue, local or global, on which these (usually anonymous) writers do not pronounce with a papal-like editorial "we." Like the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the editorial board is there to defend received truth as well as advance the paper's political, social and cultural agendas. One can no more imagine a Times editorial opposing any form of abortion – to take just one of that magisterium's articles of faith – than imagine a papal encyclical in favor.

The Times, of course, does not claim to speak infallibly in its judgments on current events. (Neither does the pope.) But to the truly orthodox believers in the Times, its editorials carry the burden of liberal holy writ. As the paper's first and most acute public editor, Daniel Okrent, once put it, the editorial page is "so thoroughly

saturated in liberal theology that when it occasionally strays from that point of view the shocked yelps from the left overwhelm even the ceaseless rumble of disapproval from the right.” Okrent’s now famous column was published in 2004 under the headline “Is the New York Times a Liberal Newspaper?” and I will cite Okrent more than once because he, too, reached repeatedly for religious metaphors to describe the ambient culture of the paper.

The Times also has its evangelists. They appear daily as the paper’s columnists. Like the church, the Times historically has promoted its evangelists from within the same institutional culture. This assures a uniformity of assumptions only the Vatican and Fox News can trump. Even when the editors reach outside the corporate fold, as they must for columnists of even mildly conservative persuasion, they do not look for adamant conservatives like George Will to match the heavy-breathing liberalism of Frank Rich and Paul Krugman. Culturally, conservatives David Brooks and once-a-week columnist Ross Douthat inhabit the same world as their liberal colleagues, though it must be said that Brooks and Douthat are the only Times columnists I can recall who welcome an expansive role for religion in public life.

At the Times, the public editor’s job is to examine the paper’s news stories for evidence of biased reporting and unwarranted narrative assumptions. (Would that Rome had ombudsmen – and ombudswomen – to represent voices not heard at the Vatican.) On this point, Okrent’s essay was forthright: it is one thing to provide a “congenial home” for like-minded readers, he observed, “and quite another to tell only the side of the story your co-religionists wish to hear.” On social issues like “gay rights, gun control, abortion, and environmental regulation, among others,” Okrent wrote, “... if you think the Times plays it down the middle on any of them, you’ve been reading the paper with your eyes closed.” And there was this: “If you are among the groups the Times treats as strange objects to be examined on a laboratory slide (devout Catholics, gun owners, Orthodox Jews, Texans); if your value system wouldn’t wear well on a composite New York Times journalist, then a walk through this paper can make you feel you’re traveling in a strange and forbidding world.”

*Next: The New York Times creates its “own” religion.*

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