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THE CATHOLIC ADJUSTMENT TO LIBERAL LAWS

The ongoing drama of the Catholic Church in a liberal society is tantalizing. Day by day, the bishops run into U.S. orthodoxies. Here are three postulates of U.S. liberal sociology.

1. People make mistakes, and society should recognize that such mistakes are, as often as not, the result of tensions and ambivalences and confusions and inequalities in the society that has nurtured them.

-- However. In the matter of the Catholic priests, we do not want to hear that kind of thing. We want to be reassured that every priest who is accused of improper relations with boys (or girls) will be reported directly to prosecutors who should be given exclusive dominion over the priest's life and career. And we expect that the priest complained of should immediately be withdrawn from clerical life and duty.

2. Some people are homosexual, some people have red hair. It is a lingering prejudice of a society not yet secure against the call of cultural atavism that homosexuals are thought of as in any way different from heterosexuals, save obviously in the matter of whom they elect to have sex with. Prejudice against homosexuals, qua homosexuals, is on the order of prejudice against women, Jews and blacks.

-- However. A commitment to First Amendment rights requires the protection of religious freedom, and the Catholic Church, while not condemning the man or woman who has homosexual inclinations, does condemn the practice of homosexual sex. This inevitably gives rise to a level of prejudice that the Catholics have to come to terms with. If all Catholic homosexuals are expected to be celibate, then the Church is in effect imposing on the entire Catholic homosexual community standards of behavior reasonably demanded only of priests who take voluntary vows.

3. It has never been established that the culture in which sexual appetites are indulged in newspapers, magazines, movies and books is, on that account, a society mandated to sexual promiscuity. The same First Amendment that preserves the right to exercise one's own religion preserves also the right of the sensualist and the pornographer to display his wares, and of the Hollywood actor to observe his marriage vows only for as long as it is convenient for him/her to do so.

-- However. The Catholic Church opts to exact vows of celibacy in its ministry. That exaction, we know from nothing more than a wise study of mankind, is in most cases inordinate, and unrealistic. The temptations of a celibate priestly order are manifest, but the enforcement of their outworn code is a matter for the bishops to undertake, and civil authorities to step in where there is child abuse.

Now, even if the libertine imperative can be resisted by normal men and women, people who don't translate rampant sexual indulgences of others into a license to personal promiscuity, the Catholic priest is different. The priest, by the rules of the Church, is a male, and has to be required to observe civil standards of appropriate behavior. There are not many instances of Catholic priests abusing girls, but a good many, as we have seen, of Catholic priests abusing boys. This is not to be translated into the suggestion that homosexuals have a greater propensity than heterosexuals to violate their vows to celibacy. It means merely that the Church has to take stronger measures to guard against rule-breaking. But such measures must not call for any prejudice against ordaining homosexuals.

But can we talk about such things? Monsignor Eugene Clark, the rector of St. Patrick's Cathedral, is a radiant light of eloquence, evangelical charm and courage. In his renowned sermon of last week he elaborated on five "grim influences" that have taken their toll. He spoke of a flawed moral theology, an attack on celibacy, the fear to exclude

homosexuals from the priesthood, a weakening of high standards in choosing candidates for the priesthood, and an understanding of the influence of our pagan culture.

Somebody walked out of the church after hearing the homily. Where will he go, one wonders?

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