

Today's Martyrs

Resources for understanding current Christian witness and martyrdom

News Analysis - 2017-09-16

In the past few weeks two stories have appeared that demonstrate weaknesses in the Christian media from which we all rely upon for news. Please allow us to describe these two news accounts and then lay out their implications.

First News Account

Imposition of unconstitutional religious tests for Federal office in the United States



In this year so far there have been three incidents in which Christian nominees for high office in the United States have been attacked in the U.S. Senate for their religious views.

- In May Dr. Mark Green, an evangelical Protestant, withdrew his nomination as Secretary of the Army after he was attacked for his religious views; this story was covered in the Evangelical media but almost nowhere else.
- Then in June, Russell Vought – another Evangelical and nominee for Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Budget – was grilled by Senator Bernie Sanders over religious views that are core beliefs in Christianity. Vought's hearing was widely reported in the entire Christian media, although one might think that the only reason for this was the recording of the Senator's confrontational demeanor and his newsworthiness as a former Presidential candidate.
- Two weeks ago a law professor and nominee to a Federal appellate court, Amy Coney Barrett, was attacked in varying degrees by three Senators for essentially being a Catholic Christian. This was picked up by much of the Catholic media, but the remaining Christian media hardly mentioned it.

It would seem that imposing unconstitutional religious tests on Christians was not in itself newsworthy, even among Christians, and especially when the imposition was on *those other* Christians.

Second News Account

Imposition of euthanasia on nominally Catholic hospitals in Belgium



This past week the story exploded in the Catholic media: “Murderous Monks”, “Monks to Pope: Nah, We’re Gonna Keep Killing People” are just a sample of the headlines seen. One columnist wrote “I remember laughing and guffawing over a character in one of those ridiculous Dan Brown novels that featured an albino monk assassin. An albino monk assassin?! Can you imagine? Oh, how I mocked this terrible slander of Catholics...Ahem. My guffawing has met an abrupt end as I can only still say, ‘Dan Brown, there are no albino monk assassins. They’re Belgian’”.

Anyone who has been following the details of this story on the Today’s Martyrs web site knows that these articles are only barely true. Here are the facts in more detail than the sketches we normally publish:

1. The religious community of monks in question is the Brothers of Charity, which two centuries ago founded a now-worldwide chain of hospitals for the mentally ill. Their motto is *Deus Caritas Est* – God is Love.
2. The Belgian hospitals are not operated directly by the Brothers, but by a corporation called the Brothers of Charity Group. Only three monks sit on the corporate board – the majority are laypeople including the chairman and former economics professor Raf De Rycke, and former European Union President Herman van Rompuy. It is this board that approved the euthanasia policy before the end of April 2017; the language of this policy text was carefully couched in a parody of the language of Christian charity.
3. The Superior General of the Brothers of Charity, Br. Rene Stockman, publicly denounced this policy in April, and hinted that at least one monk did support the new pro-death policy: “[secularization is] poisoning the congregation”. After the hospital board refused to revoke its decision Br. Rene called upon the Belgian bishops to intervene; after the appeal of the Belgian bishops to the board was ignored he asked for Vatican intervention.
4. Br. Rene published a document in May stating the position of his community’s leadership. [The document can be read here](#). The document attacks the policy text with an eloquent Christian defense of the dignity of the mentally ill and their right to life.

5. In August the Vatican issued an order to the Brothers of Charity: repeal the new policy or else all monks must sign a document denouncing the new policy. Pope Francis later stated his support of the Vatican order, as did the Belgian bishops. No such order was given to the lay Catholics on the board.
6. Br. Rene and the Brothers of Charity leadership responded to the Vatican order [with a supporting document, which can be read here](#). In it Br. Rene wrote that hospital staff members – certainly including monks - have reported to him that patients have expressed fear that they will be killed, which confirms the monks’ collective opposition to the new policy.
7. As an aside, about this time former EU President Herman van Rompuy was outed as a board member in a tweet by Belgian citizen and Catholic University of America canon law professor Kurt Martens. Hours later van Rompuy replied with a tweet that read “The time of ‘*Rome has spoken, the matter is settled*’ is long past”. This gratuitous attack on the Catholic Church by one of its leading albeit nominal members has been quite an illumination of the current situation and has shown where the real responsibility for the conflict has lain.
8. As the Vatican deadline neared Br. Rene stated that if the hospital board does not reverse the policy then they will be sued to force them to declare they are not Catholic and deny them the use of the ‘Brothers of Charity’ name. He also stated if any of the brothers refused to sign the letter upholding Catholic teaching against euthanasia, “then also we will start the correct procedure foreseen in canon law”, most likely their removal from their religious state. Any such renegades will be monks no longer.

Does this sound like real “Murderous Monks”? Hardly. It would appear that the major Catholic media outlets have missed the facts regarding the composition of the hospital board and its longtime legal separation from the actual Brothers of Charity religious community. It has not helped that Br. Rene appears to be a kind man, and so the media seemed to prefer to quote his more conciliatory words regarding “talks” and “dialog” and less so those that demonstrate his true determination. At worst there are up to three monks who voted for this un-Christian conformance to the modern world, and the large majority appear to oppose it and are in full accord with their church’s corrective mechanisms.

Implications

Yes, we all make mistakes. Moreover, the best Christian web sites create a huge amount of publication: news, prayers, devotionals, testimonials, histories, prophetic witness, etc, etc, etc, that all indicate they are staffed by very busy people. We can expect that Christian writers cannot follow every detail in every small story in every faraway land.

However, the worldwide imposition of euthanasia on more and more people is not a small story: it has been a major concern in the Christian media for decades. The massive “Murdering Monks” reaction proves this is not a small story. So why were these details missed? How can we report better?

- It should be expected that today’s Christian writers understand the basics of modern corporate structures, governance, and their use by church agents such as dioceses and religious

communities. Many if not most reporters are employed under such structures. It is perplexing to think about how the correct details of this dimension of the story could have been missed.

- It appears that the slow dribble of the facts of the story into the public view was a factor. Weeks passed between articles. Later articles often omitted facts that had been disclosed in earlier articles. Continuity was lacking.
- The board and the secular media may have encouraged the confusion regarding the status between the board and the religious community so as to deflect accountability and to weaken the monks' community. Why were the lay members [i.e., those who were not monks] not disclosed, especially a former EU President? Most Belgian articles that quoted chairman of the board De Rycke's defense of the new policy never identified him by name, and often not even his title. Why? This trend went unnoticed by the Christian media.
- The apparently less-than-optimal translations into English were a factor.
- But, it also appears that there has been a certain lack of incredulity with many Christian reporters, which raises an interesting possibility: it may be that the obvious increase of anti-Christian pressures in recent years has started to exact a mental toll on us. Perhaps we have become too willing to believe in the powers that are arrayed against us and their demonstrated ability to seduce and co-opt Christians, and so we tend to not clearly see those who still fight for us, such as Br. Rene Stockman. Perhaps we need to renew, in every sense of the word, our trust in God.

A bit of good news: the Protestant and Evangelical media didn't report on this incomplete euthanasia story. A bit of bad news: the Protestant and Evangelical media didn't report on this important euthanasia story. And that leads us back to the theme of the first news account regarding the U.S. Senate hearings.

The bottom line is this: Christians of all denominations must do a better job of supporting each other in the face of discrimination and persecution. Compared with 50 or 100 years ago we are doing far better, but this analysis has shown more mutual support can and should be done. Remember, the persecutors of *those other* Christians today, those with a few beliefs you might not share, may well become *your* persecutors tomorrow. Christian unity in this matter is not an option, unless we want to risk failing our Lord, and each other.

Today's Martyrs

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