

DISSENT AND DOUBLE STANDARDS

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One of the most spectacular canards of our day is the notion that the Catholic Church is a dictatorship. Not only is this patently untrue, the fact of the matter is that part of the reason the sex abuse scandal took place is due to a collapse of discipline. Yet the myth of tyranny continues.

Dictatorships are marked by involuntary conditions: its subjects are forced to join and are without legal recourse to exit. The Catholic Church, just like other religious institutions, is a voluntary organization. No one is forced to join and everyone is free to leave; freely submitting to rules regarded by others as onerous does not invalidate the point. To be specific, it must be said that the Catholic Church, just like the *New York Times*, has every right to insist that its house rules be observed. Unfortunately, there is a double standard at work here, one that does a disservice to the Church.

In December 1999, it was reported that 23 employees of the *New York Times* were fired for violating a company policy prohibiting inappropriate e-mail. Evidently, X-rated e-mails consisting of jokes and photos were circulated during work hours. The official position of the newspaper was that the dismissals were due to a violation of a policy stating "computer communications must be consistent with conventional standards of ethical and proper conduct, behavior and manners and are not to be used to create, forward or display any offensive or disruptive messages." When *New York Times* spokeswoman Nancy Nielson was asked by reporters to elaborate on this, her reply was to say that the incident was "an internal matter."

Now this is interesting. Consider that this same newspaper has

often criticized anti-porn legislation on the basis that no one can agree what constitutes offensive material. But it has no problem having an in-house rule that punishes employees for forwarding “offensive” messages. Moreover, if the Vatican ever said that it didn’t have to explain why it was cracking down on dissent—on the grounds that it’s “an internal matter”—every pundit from New York to New Delhi would blast the Church for intolerance.

Want more? In December 2002, it was reported that the *New York Times* had spiked two sports columns that differed with the newspaper’s editorials on the Augusta National dispute. Throughout the fall, many editorials were written condemning the golf club for barring women golfers; some criticized black golfer Tiger Woods for not leading a protest. But two top sports writers, Dave Anderson and Harvey Araton, didn’t see it that way. When they submitted their columns, their bosses refused to publish them.

“Part of our strict separation between the news and editorial pages entails not attacking each other,” said *Times* managing editor Gerald Boyd. “Intramural quarreling of that kind is unseemly and self-absorbed,” he added. When spokeswoman Catherine Mathis was asked to elaborate on this she replied, “We never talk about the internal decision-making process.”

It does not matter that eventually the newspaper decided to print an edited version of the two columns; what matters is the way in which this was handled. Imagine, for a moment, the Vatican telling reporters that the reason they are cracking down on dissident priests and nuns is due to the understanding that priests and religious are not to attack the Magisterium. Imagine, too, that the dissidents are labeled “unseemly and self-absorbed” for carping. And that a Vatican spokesman told inquiring reporters to take a hike—“We never talk about the internal decision-making process.”

It needs to be said that the *New York Times* has every right to

insist that its house rules be observed by everyone. It is also true that it does not have to explain itself to others when punitive action is taken against "offenders." Why, then, does the *New York Times*, as well as virtually every media outlet in the nation, hold the Catholic Church to a different standard? More troubling, why doesn't someone from the Vatican simply say he's taking a page out of the playbook of the *New York Times* by cracking down on dissent and refusing to comment to the media for doing so?

The Catholic Church need not feel apologetic, then, for insisting that its house rules be followed. The same is true of Catholic colleges and universities: they are under no obligation to practice the politics of inclusion which, if logically pursued, would mean the complete assimilation of Catholic schools to the dominant culture. To be Catholic is to have an exclusive identity and it's time we all felt comfortable acknowledging this verity.

It is time all Catholics took a stand. Despite some obvious problems in the Church, we still have the most common-sensical and morally defensible teachings of any institution in the world. It would be a mistake to allow the din of dissent stop loyal Catholics from trumpeting our glorious teachings.