

FABRICATING DIVISIVENESS

Someone called to tell us that on January 6th, “Prime Time Live” was scheduled to do a segment on annulment in the Catholic Church. I decided to watch. A few minutes before the program began, a promo for “Prime Time Live” was run that made special mention of the annulment segment.

I’m glad it perked my interest because the lead segment of the night proved to be quite a commentary – on ABC, that is.

Diane Sawyer set the tone from the start: “Annulment is one of the most divisive issues in the Catholic Church today.” Now that is a remarkable statement. Since the show aired, I have had many conversations with fellow Catholics, not all of whom could reasonably be called “orthodox” or “traditional,” and every one of them admitted that annulment is a subject that they discuss about once or twice a year. It is hardly a burning issue with any of them and it clearly isn’t regarded as “one of the most divisive issues in the Catholic Church today.”

It didn’t take long for “Prime Time Live” to show its true colors. We heard, of course, from Father Charles Curran, the priest every Catholic-basher has come to love. Readers will recall that Father Curran was the priest who insisted on teaching moral theology *his* way while at Catholic University of America. He now teaches at some Methodist school, I think. No doubt he’s happier there. In any event, it hardly surprises to learn that Father Curran doesn’t quite approve of the Church’s handling of the annulment process.

Also unsurprising is the way “Prime Time Live” loaded the deck with disaffected women. Now I don’t know about you, but this is getting to be pretty old stuff. Every time the media want to show, or should I say sow, divisiveness in the Church, it focuses on women. Women, we learn from Ms. Sawyer, feel that

the annulment process has let them down. And so on. Since three in four Americans are not Catholic, it seems reasonable that somewhere along the way Ms. Sawyer would explain, or at least ask someone, what annulment means. But no such luck. Oh, yes, the question is raised, and a voice-over rhetorically poses the question, but the priest who is asked to explain the process is never given an opportunity to do so.

At one point in the program, Chris Wallace endeavors to have Father Edward Scharfenberger of the Diocese of Brooklyn comment on the Church 's position on annulment. Father Scharfenberger appears on the show for about 45 seconds though most of what we hear is the voice-over and background discussions between participants in a mock annulment proceeding. He actually speaks for about 5 seconds.

I called Father Scharfenberger to ask him how the interview went. To begin with, the interview lasted an hour and a half. About half way through the interview, Chris Wallace played his hand. He asked Father why so many women were angry with the Church on the subject of annulment. Father Scharfenberger then asked a logical question of Wallace: Where did he find such evidence? Wallace had none.

It is not difficult to understand why Father Scharfenberger merited so little time for the hour and a half investment that ABC made. He didn't make for good copy. To be exact, he didn't screw up. And that's what Wallace was looking for – a scoop.

Annulment in the Church is about as divisive an issue with Catholics as "Las Vegas Night." Sure, wherever there are policies that allow for exceptions, lousy decisions can be expected from time to time. But that is hardly news and it hardly explains why "Prime Time Live" decided to run this show. It seem far more plausible to assume that the media are as much interested in fabricating divisiveness as they are in reporting it. Perhaps more so.

I wrote to "Prime Time Live" requesting the evidentiary basis upon which Ms. Sawyer made her remarkable claim. I'm still waiting to hear from them and expect that the wait will prove to be about as unbearable as listening to one more commentary from Diane Sawyer and Chris Wallace.

– *William A. Donohue*