

IS JOURNALISM AUTHORITARIAN?

How many times has it been said that the Catholic Church is an “authoritarian” organization that brooks no dissent? Answer: almost as many times as there is a theologian in the news dissenting from Church teachings. Yet journalists, in particular, never tire of repeating this tired cliché about the Church. As recent events disclose, however, the question that needs to be asked is whether the profession of journalism is authoritarian.

The Clinton sexgate caper has left a lot of moral debris in its wake, not the least of which has been the spectacle of reporters donning their wrecking crew hats in search of a scandal. In the case of Rep. Henry Hyde, an on-line magazine called Salon found one: he had an affair in the 1960s. Bingo—there is no moral difference between Hyde and Clinton.

We will leave it to others to decide whether there is a difference between a man who had an affair thirty years ago and a sitting president who had oral sex in the Oval Office with a 21 year-old intern while he was discussing of the nation with a Congressman. And then lied about it under oath. But what we won't leave to others is the story within the story: quite unlike the way matters are handled in the Catholic Church, the Washington bureau chief of Salon was forced to resign after he publicly questioned the journalistic merits of the decision.

Just as the Hyde story was breaking, the editor of Salon, David Talbot, told his Washington bureau chief, Jonathan Broder, not to air his differences with his editors. But Broder didn't hold back and was summarily canned. Talbot said that Broder's decision to “publicly air his criticisms” of the Hyde story was in direct defiance of his supervisors' instructions and “a fundamental violation of the trust that any organization must have in its employees.”

That no one branded this decision “authoritarian” tells us how gentle the gentlepersons of the media can be when dealing with one of their own. Had it been the Church that gave some university theologian the boot for his decision to “publicly air his criticisms,” every major media outlet in the nation would have been screaming “authoritarian,” “censorship,” “draconian,” etc.

Want more evidence that journalism loves to brand the Catholic Church “authoritarian”? Then consider this. In a Lexis-Nexis search (it’s essentially a computer library search), we decided to see how many times, in the past 90 days, the word “authoritarian” appeared in news articles around the country with the word “journalism.” There were 34 entries.

We then decided to what happened when we linked “authoritarianism” with the major religions. When we linked “Jewish” with “authoritarianism,” we got 50 entries; there were 58 entries when we linked with “Protestant.” And when we searched to see how many times the word “Catholicism” was linked with “authoritarianism,” up popped the following: “This search has been interrupted because it will return more than 1,000 documents.”

All stereotypes die hard. This is particularly the case when it is the wordsmiths who promote them. But that is no reason to give up. Not now. Not ever.