

JOURNALISTIC MALPRACTICE

William A. Donohue

In early October, within a period of 24 hours, two prominent secular media outlets, and one prominent religious media outlet, ran stories on the Catholic Church that were classic examples of journalistic malpractice. Motive is hard to determine: Were the reporters incompetent or malicious? Maybe both. From what we learned from two of the sources, it suggests that their pre-determined conclusion allowed them to carelessly play games with the evidence.

The Associated Press is the nation's most influential wire service, providing news stories to papers and websites across the nation. Most of its work is quite good, but there are times when it fails. It sure failed professional journalistic standards when it did a story on former priests, men who left the priesthood after being accused of sexual abuse.

I know of no large-scale organization in the nation which has never had an employee who either left on his own, or was thrown out, because of sexual misconduct. I also know of no such institution which tracks those who leave, keeping GPS tabs on where they go. Why, then, does AP find it so exciting to report on accused priests who are no longer in ministry, and whose whereabouts are unknown?

In 2007, AP did a great series of stories on sexual abuse in the public schools, so it knows what "passing the trash" is. This is the term used to describe the *still ongoing practice* of sending delinquent teachers to other schools or school districts (sending delinquent priests to other parishes no longer exists). Why did AP choose to find out what happens to former priests who were accused of sexual misconduct and not teachers *who are still employed, albeit by another school*? Wouldn't that be a much meatier story?

The AP reporters showed how totally incompetent they are when they criticized the Church for not insisting that these former priests register as sex offenders. Do they not know that only tried and convicted sexual offenders must register? Do they really believe that an accused person is supposed to register as a sex offender? So if I called their boss and accused them of sexual misconduct, am I to believe that they would dutifully register themselves as a sex offender? What world are they living in?

The reporters for USA TODAY are just as unprofessional. They are angry with the Catholic Church for defending itself against unjust legislation.

In most states that have passed legislation suspending the statute of limitations for crimes involving the sexual abuse of minors, the law spares the public schools. In other words, unless the proposed law explicitly applies to the public sector, the prevailing doctrine of sovereign immunity exempts public school teachers from being prosecuted unless a claim was made within 90 days. To be blunt, such laws discriminate against the private sector. Indeed, they are aimed at the Catholic Church.

The bishops, and Catholic Conference in their state, have a moral obligation to fight any legislation that amounts to religious profiling. A law that targets the Church, while giving the public schools a pass, must be fought, and if that costs money, so be it. Go hire the best lobbyists and the best lawyers. Isn't that just common sense?

Why, then, did USA TODAY run a story blasting the Church for fighting unjust legislation? Would the reporters be happy if the bishops were patsies who sat on their hands while discriminatory legislation is pending?

Crux is a major Catholic media outlet. It ran a story on the Amazon synod that unfairly set me up for some cheap shots.

I wrote a piece on the dilemma that Church officials face when addressing indigenous populations in the Amazon. On the one hand, they want to be respectful of their traditions, but on the other hand they cannot approve of practices that are patently unjust. I cited the work of a distinguished anthropologist who wrote about an Indian tribe in that part of the world. He detailed the savagery of the Yanomami.

In the Crux story, the reporter quotes what I said about respecting the culture of indigenous peoples, and then jumps to my summary comment that "there is nothing noble about savages—quite the opposite." He intentionally left out what the anthropologist said, leaping over five paragraphs. This was a set up for what came next. He said some theologians and commentators thought my remark was "insensitive or tinged with racism." Cowardly, he names no one.

One of the reporters for the USA TODAY story tried to defend himself by saying he is a practicing Catholic. He may be but that is not exculpatory. He still did a lousy job.

Crux editor John Allen defended the story by Christopher White seeing nothing wrong with it. That shows his lousy judgment.

Journalism must be held to high standards, otherwise trust in reporting will lead to its demise. Too many reporters have agendas, and that is not something that should be tolerated. That the Catholic Church experiences its fair share of journalistic malpractice cannot be denied.