

AMICUS BRIEF FILED IN PA; CHURCH UNDER ATTACK

On September 24, the Catholic League filed an amicus curiae brief with the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in support of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown's appeal of the badly flawed decision in *Rice v. Altoona-Johnstown*, et al. We are being represented by the Pittsburgh law firm, Jones Day.

The case involves Renee Rice's contention that she was molested 40 years ago by Fr. Charles Bodziak at St. Leo's Church in Altoona. The priest denies the accusation. Her lawsuit charges that two bishops tried to cover up Bodziak's behavior, even though the diocese sent her a letter 10 years before her lawsuit encouraging her to share details of her abuse. Amazingly, Rice held her claims until after a state grand jury report was issued by Pennsylvania's Attorney General. This is what supposedly awakened her.

Just as amazing is an intermediate state appellate court ruling that changed a basic principle of law: it altered the timeline of the statute of limitations for a civil claim seeking damages for an alleged offense. The Superior Court's use of a grand jury report to trigger the running of statutes of limitation is unprecedented: it seeks to change the practice of allowing the clock to start at the time of an injury.

As our brief states, this Superior Court ruling "effectively enacts window legislation [the look-back provision] from the bench, contrary to decades of precedent." We have reached a new level of creative jurisprudence when a court can invoke a jury decision as the new clock determining when the limitations period starts to run. At issue here is the separation of powers between the legislature and the judiciary, not exactly a small issue.

The plaintiff's bar has been quick to recognize the financial goldmine of Rice. They have called it a "game-changer" that will "open the courthouse doors" to decades-old claims. The floodgates have opened, with 15 copycat lawsuits being filed; more will surely follow.

There is little doubt that this case was heavily influenced by the media sensationalism attendant to the Pennsylvania grand jury report on the Catholic Church. If the Superior Court decision is not overturned it will not only have a ruinous impact on the Church, it will affect all religious organizations. Indeed, it will also impact commerce, putting schools, hospitals, colleges, the Boy Scouts, and all employers at risk for being sued decades later.

At stake are some fundamental principles of law. We could not sit back and allow this power grab to go unchecked. We hope the Pennsylvania Supreme Court will accept review of *Rice* and overturn a very bad law and even worse policy.

USCCB RULES ON TITLE VII

In October, three committees of the USCCB issued a strong statement on three cases before the U.S. Supreme Court on the rights of homosexual and transgender persons. The bishops made the case that the 1964 Civil Rights Act does not apply.

There are two cases that involve the rights of gay employees, and one that involves the workplace rights of a transgender person. While they are not identical, there is one common factor that unites them: the rights being claimed under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act are nowhere found in that law. This provision makes discrimination based on sex—being a man or a woman—illegal. It says nothing about sexual

orientation, never mind so-called gender identity, the claim that the sexes are interchangeable.

The bishops concentrated their remarks on the meaning of “sex” as defined by the Civil Rights Act. “‘Sex’ should not be redefined to include sexual inclinations or conduct, nor to promulgate the view that sexual identity is solely a social construct rather than a natural or biological fact.”

The bishops did not duck the religious liberty implications of these cases. “Redefining ‘sex’ in law would not only be an interpretive leap away from the language and intent of Title VII, it would attempt to redefine a fundamental element of humanity that is the basis of the family, and would threaten religious liberty.”

Kudos to the bishops for making such a convincing argument.

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.

ATHEISTS WHO ARE HATERS

Bill Donohue

When I studied at New York University for my undergraduate degree, no one had a greater influence on me than Sidney Hook.

Hook was one of the most brilliant political philosophers of the 20th century. He started as a Marxist and wound up a moderate conservative. He was also an atheist, though I never detected, or read about, any hateful comments that he ever made about religion, or people of faith. He was too decent a man to engage in hate speech.

There is no reason to believe that most atheists today are hateful persons; they simply don't believe in God. Unfortunately, when it comes to organized atheists, that's a different story: many are hateful persons, spilling their venom at innocent men and women who practice their faith. Among the worst are the atheist haters at Freedom From

Religion Foundation (FFRF).

When FFRF is in the news, it is a sure bet it is trying to censor some person or religious symbol. It is known for what it is against, not what it is for, save hatred for religion. Recently, it got bent out of shape when Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt said he would speak at a Protestant church in Tulsa. What makes FFRF's beef so dishonest is its habit of ignoring politicians who use black churches for a rally. This goes on all the time.

FFRF is based in Madison, Wisconsin, a left-wing college town. It was founded in 1976 by Anne Nicol Gaylor and her daughter, Annie Laurie Gaylor. They regard themselves and their members as "freethinkers," to be distinguished from all of those close-minded persons who believe in God. They are too smart for that. Yet they have no idea how the world began or why we are here, choosing to believe in nothing. "Nothinkers" may be a more apt way of characterizing them.

Last year at this time, FFRF featured Cecile Richards at its annual convention; she was the outgoing president of Planned Parenthood. She was a good choice: FFRF is passionately pro-abortion. So much so that Anne Nicol Gaylor once wrote a book, *Abortion Is A Blessing*. So much for the argument that "no one is really for abortion."

Why are so many organized atheists rabidly pro-abortion? Sex. They believe in a pansexual world where everything goes, absent any judgment. For them, the three most dreaded words in the English language are, "Thou Shalt Not." They don't want to be told by anyone what they should and should not do, and they sure don't want to hear from religious Americans.

One reason why FFRF is on the march these days is because of the lack of competition from American Atheists. There is great irony in this story: its former chief, David Silverman, was fired on April 12, 2018 for sexually assaulting women. Had he

not sneered at “Thou Shalt Not” he might still be president.

Religious liberty is constantly under attack by FFRF. It recently became apoplectic when it learned that the Trump administration, under the tutelage of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, announced the formation of the Commission on Unalienable Rights. This entity, led by Mary Ann Glendon, the brilliant Harvard law professor who serves on the Catholic League’s advisory board, is charged with assessing human rights from the perspective of natural law and natural rights. These founding principles scare the daylight out of FFRF: that’s because they reflect our Creator, the source of our unalienable rights.

Religious symbols in the workplace bother FFRF. They want them banished. When it learned that employees in a municipal building in Taylor County, Texas had crosses on their desks, it went bonkers. Another worker had the gall to have a Bible on his desk. To make matters worse, “God Bless America” signs were also found, including one on the door of the Veterans’ Service Office.

FFRF sees Christian symbols as analogous to swastikas. That’s why it had a fit with an Alabama school board in Cullman County when it added “In God We Trust” to school displays last year. In 2017, it wrote a threatening letter to Dan Hughes, mayor of Henderson County in Tennessee. Why? FFRF learned of a biblical verse from Psalms etched on the wall of the local county courthouse. It did not matter that the verse had been there for a half century without anyone complaining.

The good news is that FFRF loses more than it wins. Over the summer it took it on the chin when a federal appeals court overturned a lower court ruling on the constitutionality of allowing Lehigh County, Pennsylvania to keep its 75-year-old seal that has an image of a Christian cross. The Philadelphia appeals court noted that the seal did not amount to a government endorsement of religion.

The House of Representatives begins each legislative day with a prayer, a practice that has been observed since the First Continental Congress. In 2016, FFRF officials demanded equal time: it asked House Chaplain Father Patrick Conroy for the right to offer a “non-prayer” invocation. After they were denied, they sued. In 2017, they lost in federal district court. The next year they lost on an appeal to the D.C. Circuit Court. It was only fitting that they lost on Good Friday.

Veterans often rely on religion for peace and solace. When FFRF found out in 2007 that the Department of Veterans Affairs gave veterans spiritual assessments, asking about their religious practices, it sued. Chalk up another loss.

FFRF hates Christmas. If it can't censor nativity scenes, it settles for a contrived competition, displaying some silly secular symbols next to the crèches. This is another example of its “against” agenda: it is always against something that Christians like. Satanic displays, of course, meet with its approval. Though the atheists would like to stop the Catholic League from displaying its life-size nativity scene every year in Central Park, it cannot: we get a permit from the New York City Parks Department; the government cannot discriminate against people of faith in venues that are considered a public forum.

FFRF has a special hatred of Catholics. From time to time, it likes to take out newspaper ads imploring Catholics to leave the Church. I have never seen it ask Muslims to leave their mosques or Jews to leave their synagogues.

Whenever a Catholic is in the news for doing something wrong, FFRF pounces on it. But when Stephen Hicks murdered three Muslims near the campus of the University of North Carolina in 2015, it said nothing. That's because Hicks was a militant atheist.

Lots of Americans who are not Catholic are proponents of school choice, but when this issue surfaces, FFRF chooses to make it a Catholic issue. For example, Trump's Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has been accused by FFRF of pushing a "theocratic agenda to destroy public, secular education." The leading "theocrats," of course, are Catholics.

In some parts of the country, it has long been considered acceptable to have polling stations in or adjacent to a church. Voters simply cast their ballot and leave. But the issue is not that simple for FFRF. Annie Laurie Gaylor zeroed in on Catholics when she addressed this in 2003, and her words were not measured. "Asking a feminist to vote in a Roman Catholic Church is like asking a black man to vote in a KKK hall." That's right—there is no difference between a local Catholic church and a facility used by racists and terrorists.

Whenever a pope comes to the United States, FFRF rears its ugly head in protest. It not only objects to spending public monies for security purposes (newsflash: the pope is a head of state, not just a religious leader), it objects when public institutions cooperate with his visit. In 2017, it was angered when it learned that the football team at the University of Michigan attended a papal audience. When it learned that the athletes were to receive a papal blessing, it said this was a violation of the First Amendment. It looked foolish again—no one paid it any heed.

FFRF doesn't like Catholic judges. It is therefore not surprising to learn that it thinks we have too many Catholics on the Supreme Court. It has a special hatred of Catholic male judges. In 2014, it took out a full-page ad in the New York Times objecting to the Hobby Lobby decision (which did not involve a Catholic company) because the five Catholic male judges voted to sustain religious liberties.

"DOGMA SHOULD NOT TRUMP OUR CIVIL LIBERTIES. ALL-MALE ALL-ROMAN CATHOLIC MAJORITY ON SUPREME COURT PUTS RELIGIOUS WRONGS

OVER WOMEN'S RIGHTS."

Translated this means that it was furious with the ruling that sustained the right of an evangelical Christian owner not to pay for contraception in his healthcare plan for workers. FFRF blamed the male Catholics for the decision.

FFRF never says a word about the fact that one third of the Supreme Court is Jewish, though Jews make up only two percent of the population. Nor does it say anything negative about Sonia Sotomayor: not only is she not a practicing Catholic, she is reliably pro-abortion and always follows the gay agenda. She is the kind of Catholic FFRF likes.

Aside from the late Christopher Hitchens, the famous atheist whom I debated on many occasions, it would be hard to find anyone who hates Mother Teresa (now St. Teresa of Calcutta). Hard but not impossible. FFRF does.

In 2003, FFRF condemned the Madison Metro System in Madison, Wisconsin because it put a picture of Mother Teresa on its bus pass for the month of April; its practice was to choose a prominent person each month for this honor. The fanatics at FFRF saw this as a violation of church and state. To show how much FFRF hates Catholics, when the May pass featured a picture of Rev. Martin Luther King, it said nothing.

In 2016, atheists took to the streets of Washington, D.C. to promote their cause. That agenda, of course, meant an agenda of hate. FFRF was there, of course, and no doubt was loving it when atheist Penn Jillette went on an obscene rant against Mother Teresa.

Owing to the clout of conservative evangelical Christians, FFRF has often set its sights on them, as well as Catholics. In 2012, it was so incensed about conservative Christians who allowed politicians to speak at their churches, that it actually sued the IRS for not enforcing its rules. Naturally, it said nothing about African American churches inviting

candidates for public office to address their congregations. In 2014, FFRF claimed victory when there was none: FFRF withdrew its lawsuit after the IRS simply clarified its strictures.

I am saving the best for last. In 2018, the IRS revoked the tax exemption status of NonBelief Relief, an agency incorporated by FFRF for failing to file its Form 990 for three consecutive years. FFRF then sued the IRS, claiming the tax-exempt status was unfairly revoked.

In October, it held its annual convention, featuring speakers no one ever heard of, which is precisely what we would expect from a group of “Nothinkers.” They really are a sorry bunch of losers.

MICHIGAN AG NESSEL SLAPPED DOWN BY JUDGE

A federal district court judge in Michigan has upheld the religious freedom of a Catholic foster care and adoption agency, while calling out the “religious targeting” engaged in by Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel.

At issue is whether faith-based foster care and adoption agencies may refer same-sex and unmarried heterosexual couples to other agencies, rather than be forced to place children with such couples themselves, in violation of their religious beliefs.

As district court judge Robert Jonker explained in his 32-page ruling, the Michigan legislature in 2015 enacted a law upholding the right of faith-based agencies to adhere to the

teachings of their Church. But Nessel opposed the law, promised in her campaign not to enforce it, and last spring entered into a settlement with the ACLU whereby the state would terminate its contracts with faith-based agencies that refuse to violate the tenets of their religion.

St. Vincent Catholic Charities of Lansing, Michigan, which includes foster care and adoption among its many services, challenged Nessel's policy in court; yesterday judge Jonker ruled in favor of St. Vincent, blocking the state from terminating its contract with the Catholic agency.

"The record demonstrates," the judge concluded, "that the State's new position targets St. Vincent's religious beliefs."

Jonker was unstinting in his rebuke of Nessel for her anti-Catholic bigotry.

He noted that she referred to Michigan's 2015 religious freedom law as "indefensible," labeling its supporters "hate mongers" and charging that it's only purpose was "discriminatory animus."

Jonker wrote that Nessel's 2018 campaign and her statements as attorney general "create a strong inference that the State's real target is the religious beliefs and confessions of St. Vincent, and not discriminatory conduct." Moreover, she sought to terminate the state's contract "simply because St. Vincent adheres to its sincerely held religious belief that marriage is an institution created by God to join a single man to a single woman." Furthermore, this "strongly suggests that the State's real goal is not to promote non-discriminatory child placements, but to stamp out St. Vincent's religious belief" and replace it "with a State-orthodoxy test that prevents Catholic believers from participating."

"All of this," he concluded, "supports a strong inference that St. Vincent was targeted based on its religious belief, and that it was Defendant Nessel who targeted it."

The judge said Nessel's policy—which would “flout the letter and stated intention of the Michigan legislature”— “actually undermines the state's stated goals of preventing discriminatory conduct and maximizing available placements for children.”

“Shuttering St. Vincent would create significant disruption for the children in its care, who already face an unpredictable home life and benefit from stability,” Jonker wrote. “It would also hurt the foster and adoptive parents who rely on St. Vincent for support and would have to find new resources.”

We are most pleased with the judge's ruling because the Catholic League has been exposing Nessel as an anti-Catholic bigot since she declared her candidacy for this office. She has finally received her comeuppance.

BUTTIGIEG NEEDS TO MAN UP

Abortionist Ulrich Klopfer has legally killed thousands of babies in South Bend, Indiana, home to its mayor and presidential hopeful Pete Buttigieg. After refusing to speak to the latest news—2,246 fetal remains were found in Klopfer's home—Buttigieg has finally spoken about this story. But his remarks show that he still refuses to man up.

Here is what Buttigieg said about his hometown abortionist. “Like everyone else, I find the news out of Illinois extremely disturbing, and I think it's important that it be fully investigated. I also hope it doesn't get caught up in politics at a time when women need access to healthcare. There's no question that what happened is disturbing. It's unacceptable. And it needs to be looked at more fully.”

Spoken like a true Rhodes scholar.

His first dodge was to distance his South Bend abortionist from his hometown—the “products of conception” (as the pro-abortion fans like to call them)—were found in Klopfer’s Illinois home, not in his South Bend clinic. Nice try, Pete, but no one is taking the bait. He’s your guy.

His second dodge was to characterize what happened as “disturbing.” No, getting a parking ticket is disturbing—finding thousands of human body parts in a home is horrifying.

His third dodge was his refusal to say what it is that disturbs him. After all, if he is okay with abortion, why is it disturbing to learn about over 2,000 fetal parts in the home of his hometown abortionist?

Notice how skillful Buttigieg is in the way he dances around the issue. “It’s important that that be fully investigated.” What is the that, Mr. Mayor? “I also hope it doesn’t get caught up in politics....” What is the it that you are referring to? “There’s no question what happened here is disturbing.” What exactly was it that happened? “It’s unacceptable. And it needs to be looked into fully.” Again, what is the it that disturbs you? (Our italics.)

Whatever appeal this guy once had, it has vanished. A more deceitful candidate would be hard to find.

PRO-ABORTS SPIN ABORTION

DECLINE

The abortion rate hit a 46-year low in 2017. This is the central finding reported by the Guttmacher Institute, a pro-abortion research organization that was formerly aligned with Planned Parenthood. It also found that there was a 7% decline in abortions since 2014. Pregnancy rates also declined.

To most Americans, regardless of their position on this subject, it is good news to learn that the abortion rate is now at its lowest rate since abortion was legalized. The reaction from the pro-abortion industry, however, is less than positive.

The Guttmacher study found that the abortion rate declined dramatically in those states that enacted more restrictive abortion laws. The authors of the study try to downplay the significance of these laws, saying that they “do not appear to have been the primary driver of declining abortion rates.” But if that is the case, why are they worried about such laws? In the same report they admit that “abortion bans would undoubtedly prevent many individuals from obtaining abortion care in clinical settings.”

Dr. Herminia Palacio, Guttmacher’s CEO and president, takes umbrage at the suggestion that restrictive abortion laws are responsible for the decline in abortions. “Lowering the abortion rate is not the goal here. The abortion rate is just a number.”

Of course, lowering the abortion rate is not the issue for the pro-abortion industry—it thrives when abortion rates increase—but to those of us who are concerned about the sanctity of innocent human life, the abortion rate is critically important.

To Dr. Palacio, the abortion rate is just like a bingo game of numbers. But the numbers matter because they give evidence of

the number of babies killed in utero. Her linguistic sanitization of what the numbers mean reflects her macabre way of thinking about this subject.

Rachel Jones, one of the authors of the Guttmacher study, speculates that the decline in the abortion rate is a function of ObamaCare and the easy availability of birth control. "The anti-abortion activists will try to take credit for this decline," she says, "but the facts don't support their argument." She is wrong.

The Guttmacher study is heavy on citing structural causes that impact on abortion rates, but is wholly neglectful of considering cultural causes.

A survey released in January by The Polling Company, a prominent research organization, found that "7 in 10 Millennials support limits on abortion through specific policies like parental notification, limiting abortions later in pregnancy like at 5 months of pregnancy, and opposition to government funding of abortion." Similarly, it found that "Only 7 percent shared the position of the Democratic Party Platform—abortion without any exceptions and funded by tax dollars."

Students for Life Institute of America commissioned the poll, and its president, Kristan Hawkins, offered an explanation that the Guttmacher Institute cannot bear to hear. "Millennials have lived with the harsh realities of abortion all their lives and understand more than their parents' generation that we must address the human rights issue of our day and make changes in defense of mothers and their preborn infants."

Yes, it is sad but true that many Millennials know of friends who have shared stories about the horrors of abortion. Worse, some have learned that their own would-be-siblings had their lives taken from them. It is these kinds of experiences that

drive young people away from the pro-abortion fanatics. And when coupled with the pictures of babies in the womb, they provide solid reasons why abortion rates have declined.

Anyone who is on the defensive about the news that abortion rates have declined to the lowest level since Roe v. Wade needs to reexamine what it is that makes them tick.

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT IN SEMINARIES IS RARE

In a joint effort by researchers at the University of Notre Dame's McGrath Institute for Church Life and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, a study of U.S. seminarians found that six percent have experienced some form of sexual harassment. It was also determined that 84 percent said that their administration and faculty took reports of sexual misconduct very seriously. Seventy-five percent said such behavior was "not at all a problem," and nearly nine in ten said there is none or little talk of sexual promiscuity at their seminary.

This is a significant change from the 1970s when sexual misconduct at U.S. seminaries was a serious problem. The sexual revolution flourished during that decade, impacting the Church as well as the larger society. That was a time when Fr. Andrew Greeley spoke about the "Lavender Mafia" of homosexual subcultures in the seminaries.

The media are not likely to run with this story as it doesn't fit into their narrative of sexual misbehavior in the Church. They certainly will not do what I will do now—compare the situation in the seminaries to other venues.

In 2013, Hollaback! commissioned a College Harassment Survey and found that 67 percent of students experienced harassment on campus. In 2006, the American Association of University Women reported that nearly two-thirds of college students experienced sexual harassment at some point during college. In 2018, an online survey by Stop Street Harassment found that 81 percent of women and 43 percent of men said they experienced some form of sexual harassment during their lifetime.

By any measure, conditions in the seminaries have vastly improved.

DILEMMAS FACED BY AMAZON SYNOD

The Amazon Synod of Bishops took place October 6-27. It generated a lot of controversy, much of it dealing with the prospect of “married men of virtue” in the Amazon region being ordained as priests. That, and much more, was discussed in the synod’s working document.

If there was one issue that posed a real dilemma for the bishops it was this: How to respect the culture of indigenous peoples while at the same time acknowledging inherent deficiencies in it. An even bigger problem was coming to terms with the logical prescriptions for progress and the anti-modernist vision of the working document on this subject.

Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino notes the working document “seems to consider the Indians or original peoples and culture as the whole of the Amazonian population, not taking into account the urban and *criollas* (white and mixed-race) population of cities and towns.”

Similarly, it should be noted that there has never been an “Amazonian society.” What exists in the hinterlands of Brazil, and nearby territories, are mostly tribes. It is these tribal peoples that the working document addressed.

Who are these people? Are they primitive, at least by our Western standards? The working document finds the terms “savages” and “primitive” to be an example of “contempt for the people and customs of the Amazon territory.” To be sure, racists have seized on such terms as a way to denigrate the people in this part of the world, but is it accurate to say that such terminology is inherently racist?

This question must be raised because many social scientists would find fault with such a dismissive attitude. No anthropologist did more to challenge the conventional wisdom of the noble savage—in the Amazon region—than Napoleon Chagnon. His book, *Yanomami: The Fierce People*, detailed how incredibly violent these Indians were. “Yanomami life was one of ‘incessant warfare,’” he said. In fact, “men who killed were more highly esteemed and had more wives and children than men who did not.”

Chagnon to the contrary, the working document offered a romanticized portrait of the indigenous people of the Amazon region. Consider the following excerpts.

- “A contemplative, attentive and respectful look at their brothers and sisters, and also at nature—the brother tree, the sister flower, the sisters birds, the brothers fish, and even the smallest sisters like ants, larvae, fungi or insects—allows the Amazonian communities to discover how everything is connected...”
- “The care of life [that they exhibit] is opposed to the throwaway culture, to the culture of exploitation, oppression and lying.” (Our italic.)
- “Everything is shared; private spaces, so typical of modernity, are minimal.”

- “The Amazon cosmovision and the Christian worldview are both in crisis due to the imposition of mercantilism, secularization, the throwaway culture, and idolatry of money.”
- “The original peoples of the Amazon have much to teach us.”
- The “agents of the techno-economic model” are denounced, as are “infrastructural mega-projects like hydroelectric dams and international highways.”

According to this portrait, it would be better for these people not to adopt the ways of the developed nations. Yet even the authors of the working document call attention to the backward ways of the people in this region. “Inefficiency of health/sanitation services” are noted. There is also a “Lack of quality in education and dropping out of school.” The public authorities are cited for responding slowly to developing “infrastructure and the promotion of employment.”

How can the well being of the indigenous peoples be improved if modern methods are rejected? Take health care. This is how current conditions are described in the working document. “Health care of the inhabitants involves detailed knowledge of medicinal plants and other traditional elements that are part of the healing process.”

Should such quaint practices be encouraged or would it be more humane to introduce them to modern medicine? Can sanitation services be expected to improve, and can infrastructure be built, if there is an animus to the “techno-economic model” and “international highways”? No matter, it seems the authors of the working document have made up their minds.

They rail against buying medicine from pharmaceutical companies, complaining about the “patenting of drugs and overpricing.” What to do? “Therefore, it is proposed to value traditional medicine, the wisdom of the elders and indigenous rituals, and at the same time to facilitate access to medicines that cure new diseases.”

If the contradictions evident in this observation have to be explained, then the situation is hopeless.

It is striking to read some of the suggestions by well-educated persons from the West. "Reject alliance with the dominant culture and with political and economic power in order to promote the cultures and rights of indigenous people, of the poor and of the territory."

If that is what these people want, then so be it. But it must be noted that this is ineluctably a recipe for stagnation and poverty. Moreover, it is a prescription that the authors have clearly rejected for themselves.

The Holy Father will ultimately decide what recommendations he will accept from this consultative body. Time will tell.

LOUSY PIECE OF JOURNALISM FROM CRUX

Christopher White, a Crux correspondent, can't even spell Bill Donohue's name right, but his more serious delinquencies entail what he wrote about him in a news story on the Amazon synod.

He correctly says that Donohue pointed out that the bishops have a dilemma on their hands. They must decide "how to respect the culture of indigenous peoples while at the same time acknowledging inherent deficiencies in it." If the next sentence sounds like an odd transition, it's because it is. "In short, there is nothing noble about savages—quite the opposite."

In fact, that sentence appears five paragraphs later, after Donohue quoted from the esteemed anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon about what he described as the savagery of an Indian tribe, the Yanomami, from the Amazon region. But the reader would never know this by reading what White said.

So why would White jump to this sentence, taking it completely out of context? So he could tee it up for this gem: “Donahue’s [sic] language characterizing the ‘deficiencies’ in indigenous culture was slammed by a number of Catholic theologians and commentators as insensitive or tinged with racism.”

The deficiencies Donohue made reference to were not something of his imagination: He quoted what the authors of the working document on the Amazon synod said. Besides deficiencies in medical care and education, they wrote about the “inefficiency of health/sanitation services.” That’s their language. Does this make them insensitive or racists as well?

One more thing. Who are these theologians and commentators who “slammed” Donohue? Why doesn’t White say who they are? Why haven’t they surfaced? Are they cowards?

Crux has done some very fine work under the auspices of John Allen. But this piece is not of that vintage—it is a lousy piece of journalism.