

# THE “AUTHORITARIAN” CATHOLIC CHURCH

**William A. Donohue**

One of the more common complaints about the Catholic Church is that it is an “undemocratic” institution. Indeed, many go so far as to label the Church “authoritarian.” While the first charge is true, the second is false.

If by democracy it is meant what Lincoln meant, government by, for and of the people, then the Catholic Church is not a democracy. But neither is any form of government, including governments that are regarded as democratic. While there can be government by and for the people, there can never be government of the people, not, at least, if we are speaking of large-scale societies. That is why we are a republic with a representative form of government. So, too, are all other “democracies.”

The Church, then, should not be criticized for what it cannot be. But this needs to be taken a step further: it would be wrong for the Church to even try to be a democracy. By way of analogy, consider a much smaller unit, the family.

A family of father, mother and children would be a disaster if every member had equal rights or where there was majority rule. Such a design would mean that children could veto the demands of their parents, a condition that would inexorably spell their own demise. That the well being of children is predicated on the responsible exercise of parental authority used to be regarded as common sense. But since it no longer is, it needs to be said.

It should be axiomatic that priests deserve to have more rights than their parishioners, just as it should be obvious that pilots should have more rights than their passengers.

The deference we pay to priests and pilots makes sense: it the special nature of their vocations, their level of training and our dependence on them that accounts for their privileged position. If they act irresponsibly, then they forfeit their status. But absent such abuse, we are obliged to abide by the strictures of those who occupy positions of power in any legitimate hierarchy, whether that be in the Catholic Church or the airline industry.

Christ deputized the apostles to carry out His mission of saving souls, and the bishops are properly regarded as their descendants. Such a design makes no pretense about being democratic. Indeed, it would be positively preposterous to contend that the Church, so founded, should be democratic.

To those who say that the Church is authoritarian because it is a rigid institution that relies on punitive measures, the only sane answer can be that the accuser is either ignorant or a propagandist with an agenda. Let me go further: there is no organization in the world today that allows more dissent—even to the point of insubordination—than the Roman Catholic Church. By comparison, consider the *New York Times* and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), two organizations largely seen as models of liberal democratic values.

Last fall, the *New York Times* fired 23 employees at an administrative center in Norfolk, Virginia for violating company policy prohibiting inappropriate e-mail. When an inquiring reporter asked a spokeswoman for the newspaper about the matter, he was promptly told it was “an internal matter.”

Now imagine what would happen if a bishop, after disciplining a priest for violating canon law, told an inquiring reporter that this was “an internal matter”? The reporter would go ballistic. My answer to that is: let him. So what? And then I’d tell him I learned this technique from the *New York Times*.

Similarly, last fall the NAACP fired its Colorado chapter president because he supports school vouchers. In May, the NAACP suspended one of its Virginia leaders for endorsing a Republican candidate (that the head of the national NAACP previously endorsed Clinton-Gore seems not to matter). And in June, the Oakland, California chapter president of the NAACP came under fire from the national organization for supporting George W. Bush.

By contrast, not a week goes by that we read of a priest or nun who isn't openly dissenting from the teachings of the magisterium, yet how many have been disciplined for doing so? The media would go off the deep end if the Church did what the NAACP regularly does to its heretics. But let them. Once again, all a bishop has to say is, "Well, sir, we learned that technique from the NAACP."

Or consider the outcry that greeted Gonzaga University president Robert Spitzer this past spring when he canned a speech by a Planned Parenthood speaker on campus. What Spitzer should have done was to say he learned this technique from the Democratic Party: in 1992, the late Bob Casey was denied the right to speak to the Democratic Convention because of his pro-life views.

It is high time we started to challenge the mythology of the "undemocratic" and "authoritarian" Catholic Church. There is too much at stake to put up with these lies any longer.