

# The Vatican, Women and Non-Catholics

It is no secret that much of the hatred of the Catholic Church these days emanates from radical feminists and those sympathetic to the feminist movement. The push for women's ordination and the passion to expand abortion rights are two of the most important forces driving anti-Catholic sentiment in the 1990s. Unfortunately, a fair amount of the rancor stems from alienated Catholics. The reasons for this disaffection are multiple but it is not they who are the object of this essay: the concern here is with non-Catholics, and more specifically with those non-Catholics who hate the Catholic Church because of the Church's teachings on ordination and abortion.

At one level, the hyper-criticism of the Catholic Church that is so trendy these days makes no sense whatsoever. When the Church doesn't deliver a politically correct message, the usual retort is that the Church is a dictatorship. But of course no one is coerced into joining the Church and those who have come to hate it can always quit. Even so, the larger question is "why do some non-Catholics get so angry about what Catholics believe?" In short, what business is it of theirs to sit in judgment? And aren't the ones passing the harsh judgments normally associated with the value-free, non-judgmental school of thought?

If it were curiosity at work, that would be understandable. But that's not what's happening. The Catholic Church isn't being looked at by curiosity seekers, it's being scrutinized, measured, examined and judged by a host of politically inspired voyeurs. In their own strange way, they can't get enough of the Catholic Church; they feed off of it. Take the issue of the Pope's recent statement on the ordination of women.

This past spring, Pope John Paul II restated the Church's teachings on ordination and immediately set off a firestorm of protest. On a local New York TV show, I discussed this issue with two men and one woman. One of the men was Jewish, the other Pentecostal; the woman was an avowed atheist. So here I was debating the wisdom of the Pope's apostolic letter with three non-Catholics, two of whom, the Pentecostal and the atheist, were outspoken in their denunciation of the Pope's letter. Perhaps the most cogent remark of the day came from the former Mayor of New York, Ed Koch, who politely remarked that his mother always advised him not to speak ill of other religions. It is a lesson that apparently few have learned.

Newspapers all over the country were consumed with rage over the Pope's statement. Editorialists and cartoonists led the way, acting as though they had some legitimate kind of leverage on the Catholic Church. Now just imagine what the reaction would be if a priest or bishop criticized from the pulpit one of the incredibly stupid editorials or cartoons found in those newspapers. "Foul" they would cry. More than that, they would accuse the Catholic Church of imperialism, of sticking its nose in where it doesn't belong. Unhappily, this is one shoe that doesn't fit all sizes.

Abortion gets the same reaction. Some years ago I remember discussing abortion with an acquaintance of mine. She remarked that she contributes to Catholics for a Free Choice, the anti-Catholic pro-abortion group that is comprised mostly of self-hating Catholics. "But Gerda," I said, "you're a Jew." I didn't get much of an answer, just an uncomfortable shrug. "That would be like me joining 'Jews for Jesus,'" I offered. Again I got a cold response.

One of the most telling commentaries against the Catholic Church's teachings on abortion appeared recently in the *New York Times*. On June 15th, the front page headline read, "Vatican Fights U.N. Draft on Women's Rights." I read the article with interest wanting to know why the Vatican would

fight against a U.N. document on women's rights. Then I read it again, figuring I must have missed something. But I hadn't. There was no draft on women's rights. Not only was there no document by that name, there was no document that focused on women's rights. Here's what happened.

The draft that Alan Cowell discussed was a preliminary statement on population control, a document that would be hammered out in final detail in Cairo this September. The Vatican has registered its misgivings about the wording of the document and has urged that the sections on abortion and the family be reconsidered. Loose definitions of the family, coupled with the right of adolescents to make decisions about abortion independent of the wishes of their family, are troubling issues for the Vatican and, one would hope, for all Catholics.

But instead of portraying the document as a statement on population control, the prism of the *New York Times* reduced it to a commentary on abortion. And instead of citing the Church's concerns for the integrity of the family and for the life of the unborn, the subject was altered to make the Church look like the great oppressor of women. This isn't journalism at work, it's politics, pure and uncut.

Non-Catholics would do well to follow the advice of Ed Koch's mom and just give it a rest. Their crankiness is wearing thin.

—William A. Donohue