

THOSE “EVIL” IRISH NUNS

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This is the “President’s Desk” article that appears in the April edition of the Catholic League journal, “Catalyst”:

When it comes to women, men have learned to be careful not to sound sexist or condescending. If they are perceived as such, they will be stigmatized. There is one exception: they can speak about traditional nuns in a vile way with impunity. This is not limited to men. Most importantly, it includes feminists.

It is a sad truism that not a single champion of women’s rights ever defends traditional nuns against vile comments and portrayals. Indeed, it is considered appropriate that those sisters who are not at war with the Church’s teachings on women and sexuality pay a price for their traditionalism.

For example, feminists never protest when these nuns, many of whom are in habit, are cruelly caricatured by Hollywood, artists, academics, and the media. Yet these nuns are precisely the ones who have given of themselves selflessly to the Church.

No group of nuns has been more viciously vilified than the Irish nuns of the twentieth century. Even some noted politicians have chimed in, the worst of whom is the pro-abortion Prime Minister of Ireland, Enda Kenny. He is an utter disgrace.

I am an Irish citizen, as well as an American, and was largely raised by my grandparents from Ireland. So this subject hits home. I am not naive: Some Irish nuns were wicked, but to say most were is not only without foundation, it is a gigantic smear. Cardinal John O’Connor once said some priests were

evil, but anyone who knew him knew he loved his priests; the bad ones were the exception.

By the way, some professors I have met are lying propagandists who hate America, but it would be wholly unfair to say most are. The difference is that professors can defend themselves, but these days it is very difficult for Irish nuns of the last century—many of whom are sick or deceased—to get a fair hearing. So if we don't stand up for them, who will?

As I indicated, American society is not opposed to stigma, per se. But we are aghast to learn that Irish nuns, and much of Catholic Ireland, stigmatized unwed mothers and their children.

Have we forgotten what stigma is all about? Its primary function is to sanction unwanted moral attitudes and behaviors, usually in service to something good that we seek to safeguard.

In more conservative times, we spoke about the problem of illegitimacy, but today we speak about unwed mothers and their offspring. That is because we don't want to stigmatize them. The motive is pure enough—we don't seek to punish these women and children, especially knowing that the wayward fathers get off scot free. But let's not get self-righteous. For instance, it is a mistake to think that those who stigmatized these women and children in the past did so because they were evil.

If we want more of some behavior, we reward it. If we want less, we sanction it. The reason unwed mothers and their children were stigmatized is the same reason why cohabitation, adultery, polygamy, and homosexuality were stigmatized: they were seen as challenges to traditional marriage and the two parent family.

If stigmatizing alternatives to monogamy and the two parent family had no effect, then a rational case for condemning the stigmatizers could be made. But it worked. Take the 1950s.

Everyone agrees it was a much more conservative time. To the critics of this period, it was a time of sexual repression. What they are reluctant to acknowledge is that it was also a time of great family strength.

Sociologist David Popenoe noted that “greater family stability was achieved in the fifties than at probably any other time in history, with high marriage rates, low unwed birthrates, and low death rates not yet offset by sky-high divorce rates.” Importantly, he attributes the very public and influential role that religion played as contributing to this condition. That included stigmatizing alternatives to traditional marriage and the two parent family.

No one doubts that stigmatizing out-of-wedlock births has decreased, but it is also true that this has occasioned a large increase in such births.

So have we gone forward or backwards? It would be nice to live in a world where stigma was a thing of the past and where dysfunctional behaviors and lifestyles were also non-existent. But that is a pipe dream, so we must choose.

The choice has been made: we have become more accepting of deviant sexual behaviors, and in return we have witnessed a spike in family dissolution. Should we pop the champagne?

In other words, let’s not hear any more nonsense about “evil” traditional nuns who enforced sanctions against unwanted behaviors. They did so because they wanted to jealously safeguard the gold standard for all children, a stable home run by their mothers and fathers.

Remember one more thing: the mothers who dropped their out-of-wedlock children off at the convents had only one other choice at the time—the street. Thank God they chose the nuns.