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## EDITORIAL: THE POPE'S SIEGE MENTALITY

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THE PROBLEM WITH JOHN PAUL II IS HIS 'SIEGE MENTALITY.'" "EXACTLY," COMES the "liberal" response. "You see, he has been conditioned by the Polish experience where the Church was constantly under attack and so can't appreciate the American tradition of freedom and dissent." "Never," say the "conservatives." "The Holy Father is not conditioned by anything but is a brilliant man and, most importantly, the Vicar of Christ on earth." To which, I say, in a sense, "A plague on both your houses."

Pope John Paul II does have a "siege mentality," in my opinion. And yes, he has been heavily influenced by his Polish experience (but not limited by it, as his detractors assert). And it seems to me that Providence could not have offered the modern Church a more thoroughly modern Pope to deal with the modern world. To say that he does not understand the situation of the Church in the United States is tantamount to saying that he never understood the situation of the Church in Poland. The environments in which the two Catholic communities have functioned have been very similar, even if the historical responses to those respective environments have been very different. I leave aside for the moment any reflection on the Church in Eastern Europe since last year.

The Holy Father sees the cracks in the steeple of the so-called "American Church," and he believes he has the cement to make it whole and keep it whole. The cement is a healthy dose of Christian realism, combined with a siege mentality.

I would submit that the position of the Church behind the Iron Curtain was, in many ways, more conducive to a faithful living out of the Gospel than is the case in our own society. Even the persons most favorably disposed toward rapprochement with the Communists had to acknowledge that religious persecution is part and parcel of historical Marxist philosophy and politics. Therefore, anyone living in a Marxist state should automatically be on guard against government encroachment on the Faith. Eternal vigilance is joined to solidarity in faith, resulting in a strong religious community. No one can lay hold of minds and hearts prepared to resist such a process. To be even more effective, the persecuted populace must demonstrate a united front, lest those seeking to undermine the community achieve their ends by the insidious means of "divide-and-conquer." For the Church in Poland, that meant not only unity in the essentials of the Catholic Faith but also the avoidance of any public airing of "dirty linen," no matter how insignificant. This kind of approach is not unique to Polish Catholics; we see it operative among black Americans and world Jewry, so that an attack (even justified, at times) on one is perceived as an attack on all. With this sociological model, there is no room for the equivalent of "Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition," for no opposition could be loyal as it would give aid and comfort to the enemy.

I doubt if anyone would question my analysis to this point. The critical question to be answered, however, is if the Polish situation has a parallel in the United States. I believe it does and would argue further that this is likewise the case in most of the developed nations of the West. This would certainly seem to be the conclusion of Solzhenitsyn, another Slavic observer. I also believe that my analysis of the American situation could be paradigmatic for many other traditionally Catholic nations: France, Germany, Italy and increasingly, Ireland.

Is the Church under siege in America? Consider the facts. Christian values on sexuality and the family are ignored at best and attacked at worst in a variety of ways. The powerful secular media elite have decreed that America is to be liberated from its sexual hang-ups. Thus heavy doses of innuendo, double meanings and overt sexual misconduct are administered to our people, and especially our youth who are conditioned to believe that sex-on-demand is a part of the Bill of Rights - just like its twin, abortion-on-demand.

Considering the influence of television, that would be bad enough, but when traditional teachings are reiterated by religious authorities (whether they be Catholic bishops or Fundamentalist preachers), the media transmit such information in sneering and condescending manner. Immediately following such a news item, one usually hears something like this: "Although the Pope has repeated his stand on this issue, there is growing dissatisfaction among American Catholics with this new position. Father X and Sister Y with us in our studios will explain their problems with the Pope's point of view." Divide-and-conquer. Ideally, too, the dissidents who are given the ink or the air should have outstanding academic credentials, look very modern, and protest their intense love and loyalty for the Church and the Pope. What the dissenters fail to realize is that the secular media types have no more use for them than they do for John Paul II (and may even have less respect for them because of their disloyalty and/or personal confusion). They are offered prominence in exchange for serving as pawns to advance the secularists' goals for the Church: That she would be a quiet kind of art museum and not a troublesome upstart which influences peoples' lives. After all, the media cannot afford to have clergy tell people how to think and evaluate life; that is now a prerogative of the media establishment.

In the creeping secularism encountered in modern America, we find a judicial system which has moved from neutrality vis-a-vis religion to outright hostility. Consider these rather alarming examples.

The most blatant attack on religious freedom came in 1947 when the Supreme Court of the United States came up with an entirely new doctrine of separation of Church and State. The case, dealing with bus rides for parochial school children in New Jersey, was decided in favor of the bus rides, but the logic brought forth called into question any kind of intercourse between religion and government. The falsification of history and consti-

tutional principles in that decision has been used for 40 years. Only against parochial school parents a change in mood among members of have we begun the Supreme Court.

In a series of decisions from 1948 through 1963, the Court removed from the government schools any acknowledgement of religion, whether through released time classes on public school grounds or voluntary prayer. We have heard the Courts tell us that even silence is forbidden. Now, I am not a strong proponent of prayer in government schools - for a variety of reasons - but I think we have presently reached the point of total absurdity. As former President Reagan has noted, "I just happen to believe the school children of the United States are entitled to the same privileges as Supreme Court Justices and Congressmen."

Religion in public places has become more controversial every year - not in the minds of the American people or even their elected representatives but among the self-appointed secular elite who oppose any public evidence of a religious commitment in America. They have had no small degree of help from an equally secularized judiciary. From cases to do with nuns wearing habits in public schools, to the erection of nativity scenes or menorahs on public property, we have witnessed the suppression of even the appearance of religion.

While we are told that voluntary prayer in public schools would be harmful to children not opting for prayer (and there is something to be said for such a position), that same sensitivity is not forthcoming in regard to sex education. Such courses have been introduced in government schools around the country and although such programs theoretically permit parents to have their children excluded from these classes, we know that such exemptions often have been made most difficult as some schools officials do everything possible to indoctrinate all children in a completely secular and amoral understanding of human sexuality.



*JP II at Auschwitz during his famous 1979 visit to Poland*

It is ironic that those calling most often for the free exchange of ideas are among the ring-leaders of the movement to silence the so-called “creationists” in the evolution controversy. As a Roman Catholic, I have no problem with the theory of evolution, properly nuanced, and so I can function as a disinterested third party. To say that I am amused at the rhetoric and about-face of the “liberals” on this issue is to succumb to gross understatement. If the position of the creationists is so untenable, don’t these erstwhile advocates of openness and academic freedom believe the folly of the creationists will surface? Or are they simply terrified of an alternate point of view which claims religious authority?

Freedom of expression or artistic freedom have become the cloaks behind which the secularists hide to pillory religion in the arts. While not calling for censorship of such works, one must draw the line where government monies are involved, lest a gross injustice and inconsistency occur. In the past several years virulently anti-religious plays (like “Haunted by the Holy Ghost” and “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You”) and art exhibits on state college campuses and in other public fora have served up their bigotry to the American people at taxpayers’ expense. If tax dollars cannot be used to advance religion, neither can they be used to attack religion. The ACLU-types in the Courts, however, usually disagree.

Freedom of speech and freedom of assembly are perceived as basic American liberties, but there is a condition placed on them - they cannot be exercised for religious purposes on public property. Thus public high school students may meet to discuss Karl Marx as a club activity, but not Jesus Christ. The Nazis may march through Skokie at great public expense, but a platform built for Pope John Paul II in Philadelphia for reasons of public safety was judged an unconstitutional use of tax monies. When government bureaucrats do not like to see or hear the religious point of view on matters of public policy, at times the long arm of the Internal Revenue Service has reached into those institutions and threatened to withdraw their favorable tax status. Catholics and Evangelicals alike have known this form of harassment in regard to their efforts to secure a constitutional ban on abortion.

From this survey of cases, one can draw a disturbing composite picture of a Church under siege from the two most powerful forces in contemporary American life: the media and the courts. All of this produces what

Joseph Sobran has insightfully dubbed as “the established irreligion,” in which traditional religion has been marginalized and then replaced by the secularist dream of a comfortable religion of nostalgia, chant and incense, but one devoid of power - very much like the Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union. And that is why the Holy Father has pleaded with clergy and religious to be faithful to their commitments and to keep God on the streets by wearing their distinctive garb. He believes that progress is not served by caving in to pressure for programs or attitudes that dehumanize, whether that be abortion, divorce, promiscuity or contraception. He has willingly accepted the prophetic mantle his office imposes on him and now asks American Catholics to wear a similar mantle imposed on them by virtue of their baptism.

The Catholic Church in Poland has been able to stave off further incursions by the State by refusing to be neutered. The Church is determined to be and to remain the Church. That means absolute fidelity to the demands of the Gospel and being comfortable with a prophetic role which challenges the prevailing secular wisdom. Catholics in Poland have seen themselves as “the leaven in society,” to use Pope John Paul’s expression. The New Testament doctrine puts it in the context of being conformed to the image of Christ rather than to that of the world. Of course, this vision of life is that of the Christian realism I mentioned early on in this talk; that vision regards the world as being in need of salvation, not a world to be shunned or despised, but a world to be evangelized. The Church loves the world by preaching to it, so as to save it.

The “Loyal Opposition” usually concludes its discussion by expressing the fervent hope that the Pope will begin to listen to the “American Church.” Ironically enough, these are often the same people who would frown upon American imperialism in other contexts. I submit that the Pope has indeed listened to, and studied carefully, the “American Church” and has found it wanting. I think he deems it ailing and prays that it is not a sickness unto death. His antidote for the poison of secularism is the adoption of a siege mentality. The insights gained from his Polish experience and his combination of Christian realism with eternal vigilance could well provide the prescription to save both the Church and the world.

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