

Guest Commentary

Attack on Jesuits out of place

(Ed. note: Following is a letter to the Archdiocese of Denver in regard to a column by George Weigel carried in the Feb. 20 Denver Catholic Register. Written by University of San Francisco President Jesuit Father Stephen A. Privett, the letter was forwarded to Catholic San Francisco in anticipation of the newspaper carrying the Weigel column on this page.)

I write in response to George Weigel's column attacking the Society of Jesus and to register my disappointment that the Archdiocese of Denver saw fit to publish this piece [Feb. 20] and offer it for syndication.

It is difficult for me to understand how the Church is well served by such a mean-spirited assault on a religious order that has served the Church, not perfectly but well, for almost 500 years. The blood of Jesuit martyrs seeded Christianity in the Americas and Asia and more recently witnessed to the Church's preferential love for the poor in El Salvador. We Jesuits have been the subject of malicious attacks for our entire history, but rarely in an official archdiocesan newspaper. We deserve better.

Let me address some specific concerns I have regarding the accuracy of this column.

Mr. Weigel falsely claims that Father James Keenan, SJ testified in 2003 before the Massachusetts Legislature's Joint Commission on the Judiciary that Catholic social thought "demanded" gay marriage. He did not do so. Father Keenan testified against unjust discrimination against gay couples. He did not testify in support of gay marriage or approve homosexual activity. Mr. Weigel is free to argue with Father Keenan's

position, but he is not free to put false words in his mouth.

Mr. Weigel's stunningly sweeping statement that Jesuit Father Robert Drinan "did more than anyone else to convince Catholic legislators" on the issue of abortion lacks any supporting evidence. Further, attacks on Father Drinan, who has been out of Congress for more than 25 years and dead for two, strike me as singularly unfair, much like similar attacks on Pope Pius XII or Father Marcel Maciel, neither of whom are alive to defend themselves. Judgments on such complicated persons and situations are best left to qualified historians and only after a thorough review of all relevant archival materials, not to 700-word columns by opinionated pundits. The Church would be better served if we all followed the Catholic adage, *dic nihil nisi bonum de mortuis* (of the dead speak kindly or not at all).

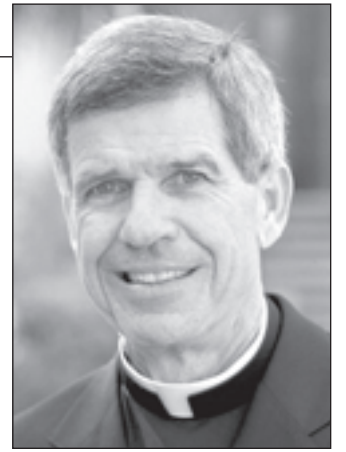
On a more philosophical point, I disagree with Mr. Weigel's reduction of abortion to a "civil rights" issue. It is that, but only by extension and secondarily. The right to life is not simply a "civil right" conferred by the 13th or 14th amendments to our Constitution or by any civil authority; it is a God-given right constitutive of the dignity of every human being at every stage of life. Mr. Weigel would seem to minimize the importance of abortion by mischaracterizing it as "the great civil rights struggle" rather than "the pivotal moral issue" of our time.

Mr. Weigel's reference to Jesuit novices in "gay drag" refers to a photo taken at a Halloween party seven years ago at the novitiate. The novices were in costumes that Mr. Weigel chose to characterize as "gay drag" while disingenuously imply-

ing some sort of sybaritic happening. (I hope no one unearths the fifth grade photo of me dressed as a nun in the 1952 All Saints Day parade at St. Mary Magdalen Grammar School in Los Angeles!) The photo in question of two novices was never "featured" by the California Province website; it was mistakenly put on-line and immediately taken off for fear it would be malevolently misinterpreted by the likes of Mr. Weigel.

"Will Father Nicolas demand that Jesuits observe their vows of chastity..." This is a classic "When did you stop beating your spouse?" question. I am not a literalist, but I saw no evidence whatsoever from Weigel that Jesuits do not observe their vow of chastity. Mr. Weigel has apparently not read the document on chastity published in 1995 by General Congregation 34 which thoroughly discusses the significance of the vow of Chastity in Jesuit life. Mr. Weigel asks, "Are there no consequences for those who violate those vows?" without producing a shred of evidence that Jesuit superiors do not hold members accountable for fidelity to their vows. They do.

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Father Stephen A. Privett, S.J.

Privett . . .

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To refer to Catholicism as "vestigial at best" on Catholic college campuses indicates an animosity toward and ignorance of Catholic universities. Just one example: USF has a Catholic Studies program; a Catholic focused-curriculum in the Theology and Religious Studies Department; a Master's Program in Catholic Theology for which those who teach in Catholic schools receive a 50 percent tuition reduction; the Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Social Thought; a Catholic theology emphasis; an endowed faculty chair in Catholic thought; the McCarthy Center for Public Service and the Common Good; a graduate Institute for Catholic Educational Leadership that has prepared countless Catholic school administrators across the country; a residential student learning community, the St. Ignatius Institute, whose common curriculum is comprised of classic texts from Augustine and Aquinas to John Paul II; a partnership with the Archdiocese of San Francisco to support Catholic grammar schools in the Mission; USF has honored Cardinal Levada and Archbishop Niederauer with honorary doctoral degrees and both archbishops have lectured on campus and met with University trustees; USF has a flourishing university ministry program with retreats, liturgies, lectures and prayer groups; USF students participate in international papal youth day.

Pope Benedict XVI expressed his feelings for the Society of Jesus in an address [the entire talk is worth reading] to members of the current General Congregation when he said to the assembled Jesuits, "The Church needs you, counts on you, and continues to turn to you with confidence, particularly to reach the geographical and spiritual places where others do not reach or find it difficult to reach." The pope asked that Jesuits "make the face of the Lord known to so many for whom it remains hidden or unrecognizable."

Mr. Weigel began his column by citing Father General Nicolas' chiding of those who "create rifts and an artificial tension" between the pope and the Society of Jesus. It appears that Mr. Weigel himself has authored a "not so helpful" piece that appears to question Pope Benedict's confidence in the Society of Jesus. The readership of Catholic diocesan newspapers deserve more civil, balanced and professional fare than that served-up and passed around by the Denver Catholic Register. One cannot build-up the Body of Christ by tearing down its members.

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Opinion



Questions for Father General

By George Weigel

Last month, the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus elected Father Adolfo Nicolas, a Spaniard, as General of the order. A few days later, Father Nicolas gently chided Roman journalists for running some “not so helpful” stories about alleged problems between the Jesuits and Pope Benedict XVI; any notion of a rift with the Vatican, he said, was “an artificial tension” created by outsiders unaware that “the Society of Jesus from the very beginning has always been in communion with the Holy Father...” The Jesuits “want to collaborate with the Holy See and to obey the Holy Father,” Father Nicolas averred. “That has not changed and it will not change.”

About which, some questions:

What will Father Nicolas do about Jesuits who are manifestly *not* obedient to the Pope or to the teaching authority of the

Church? Take, for example, the case of Father James Keenan, S.J., of Boston College. Several years ago, Father Keenan testified before the Massachusetts Legislature, arguing that the principles of Catholic social doctrine did not merely tolerate “gay marriage,” they demanded it. That position is manifestly *not* “in communion” with the teaching of popes past and present on the nature of marriage; now what?

Father Nicolas cannot be unaware of Jesuit colleges and universities whose Catholicism — measured by curriculum, faculty, and mode-of-life on campus — is vestigial at best. Does he think it appropriate for Jesuit institutions to honor Jesuits who taught the precise opposite of what the popes have taught about abortion, and distorted the meaning of papal teaching in counseling others? Georgetown University’s Law School has an endowed chair in international human rights law named after the late Father Robert Drinan, S.J., who did more than anyone else to convince Catholic legislators that the settled teaching of the Church on the grave immorality of abortion had no bearing on their legislative work. Father Drinan gave Catholic legislators a pass on the great civil rights issue of our time, yet a Jesuit university hosts a human rights chair named for him; how does this square with the Society’s commitment to social justice and with the obedient fidelity St. Ignatius bade his followers to observe in their relationship to the Church’s magisterium and to the Bishop of Rome?

Then there is the third-rail issue in religious orders today: homosexuality. In a letter to the General Congregation, Pope Benedict suggested that there were serious problems with how some Jesuits undertook the pastoral care of persons with homosexual desires. He could have gone farther and addressed this problem within the Society of Jesus itself; it was not that long ago, after all, that the Web site of the Jesuits’ California Province featured photos of “Pretty Boy” and “Jabba the Slut” in gay drag at a novices’ party. Will Father Nicolas demand that Jesuits observe their vows of chastity, whatever their sexual preferences? Will there be consequences for those who violate those vows, or cover for

those who do? Will Jesuit vocations offices and novitiates obey the 2005 Vatican instruction which states that “those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies, or support the so-called ‘gay culture’” must not be admitted to seminaries or to holy orders?

A fourth point: the tendency among some Jesuit theologians to minimize the unique salvific role of Christ. That problem is most apparent in Asia, where Father Nicolas has lived for decades; the Holy See has addressed it in recent disciplinary actions against Jesuit theologians. Does Ignatian communion with the Pope still require Jesuits to affirm the Nicene Creed, the Council of Chalcedon’s teaching on the hypostatic union, and the teaching of *Dominus Iesus* on Christ as unique savior of the world?

The Long Lent of 2002, which revealed the disastrous consequences of sexual corruption and malfeasant leadership in the Church, should have hammered home to every Catholic the dangers of euphemism, and of winking-and-nodding. When the future of a great religious congregation is at stake, there is no room for anything but the unvarnished truth. I pray that Father Nicolas provides it.

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