

11-11-07 - Church loses sight of the big picture

Dan Rodricks, The Baltimore Sun

I wonder if my cousin, my cousin's daughter and I will be going to hell - not to mention the priest who sat by as the three of us eulogized Aunt Elizabeth in the Catholic parish where she had been baptized into the faith more than 80 years ago. Eulogies are supposed to be forbidden at Catholic funerals. That's why, over the years, we've seldom heard priests make personal remarks about the departed. Those few who did might have been asking for trouble.

I assume the priest who celebrated the funeral of Aunt Elizabeth probably still has his job; I've not heard otherwise.

Then again, he's not a diocesan priest here in Baltimore, premier see of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States.

In the premier see, under the new archbishop, apparently a priest can get in big trouble for seemingly small offenses, and let that be a warning to anyone else who might have ideas about tinkering with sacred rites, letting outsiders read the Gospel, or maybe even eulogizing the departed. There could very well be a crackdown coming.

That's the signal one gets from the story out of South Baltimore - that after just six weeks on the job, the nation's former military archbishop, Edwin F. O'Brien, has dismissed the priest who led three parishes for the past five years, because he allowed a female Episcopal priest to read the Gospel during a funeral.

In its account of this story Friday, Catholic World News reported this as "liturgical abuse."

As distressing as this story is for the people of Father Ray Martin's three parishes, it was a relief to see the word "liturgical" between "priest accused of" and "abuse" in a headline. (Friday morning, when The Sun's report on Martin's dismissal appeared on our Web site, two of the Google ads that popped up next to it were for child sex-offender lists.)

Here, in the long wake of the priest sexual-abuse scandals, the Baltimore Archdiocese's reference to Father Martin's offenses as "bringing scandal to the church" seem almost laughable.

What were his offenses? Martin allowed other clergy to participate in the Oct. 15 funeral of longtime Locust Point activist Shirley Doda at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church on Fort Avenue. Among those at the altar was the Rev. Annette Chappell, the pastor of nearby Episcopal Church of the Redemption. Doda's son had asked Chappell to participate in the Mass.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. It is not unusual to see clergy of other churches and faiths at Catholic services. In fact, it was something for which O'Brien's predecessor, Cardinal William H. Keeler, was noted. Pope John Paul II praised Keeler for his ecumenical work toward "interfaith understanding." And two days after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Keeler convened and conducted a prayer vigil at the Basilica of the Assumption with an imam and a rabbi.

At Doda's funeral last month, Martin's big offense was that he allowed the Episcopal priest to read the Gospel - a violation of canon law.

According to Friday's Sun article, the person who reported this to the archdiocese also said Martin gestured to Chappell to take Communion during Mass, another violation. But Martin said he did not recall making the gesture. Still, that's just the tip of the iceberg, apparently.

A spokesman for the archbishop said Martin had "repeatedly violated church teaching." He hired a maintenance man with a criminal background - I guess forgiveness and redemption must violate church teaching - allowed dogs in the sanctuary and did not show up for a baptism.

(A priest serving three parishes must have a lot on his plate.)

This seems like another case of someone losing sight of the big picture because he's too busy splitting hairs.

Anyone looking at this, in the grand sweep of things, has to wonder: Is this really worth all the trouble and bad feelings? Was there another remedy besides banning Martin from celebrating Mass publicly and banishing him to a monastery and upsetting his parishioners?

O'Brien never served as a parish priest, so he probably doesn't fully understand how emotional Catholics can get about the priests they see as being truly committed to them. There's a severe shortage of priests - there are something like 200 to serve half a million Catholics in this archdiocese - and that fact is not lost on Baltimore Catholics, who have seen their parishes closed or consolidated over the past decade. Take a good priest away, and even an esteemed archbishop will catch flak - even from conservative parishioners.

Not that it makes any difference.

This is not a democracy. There's no due process. A few years ago, when O'Brien was archbishop of military services, he had a similar disagreement with Father Thomas Doyle, an Air Force chaplain. O'Brien dumped Doyle as a chaplain and, months later, denied to The New York Times that the demotion was punitive. (Starting in the 1980s, Doyle had been warning American bishops of widespread sexual abuse in the priesthood, and he made himself a thorn in the side of the hierarchy by advising abuse victims on their rights.)

Many of the people of the Catholic Community of South Baltimore, the three parishes Father Ray Martin served, are upset about what happened, and some are threatening to walk out of church today after Communion. I applaud them. I applaud anyone who exercises his or her right as a citizen. But in the realm of the mysterious and powerful, what you say or think doesn't matter. Your country is a democracy. Your church isn't.