

Do not weep for me, weep for yourselves

"The spirit we have, not the work we do, is what makes us important to the people around us."

By Joan Chittister, OSB From Where I Stand Column

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There's a line in scripture that has plagued me for years. Now I have experienced it.

Nobody talks about the passage much. I, on the other hand, have never been able to forget it. On the way to his death on Calvary, Jesus says to the weeping women of Jerusalem who have come to grieve his impending execution, "Women, weep not for me. Weep for yourselves and for your children." Strange, I thought to myself years ago. Strange. Why a line like that at a time like that?

Now I realize that it's not a strange kind of statement at all for a time like that, a time when the innocent are called guilty and the committed are called heretical and the society itself is, as a result, on the brink of losing credibility with the faithful as a result.

When the announcement of Tom Reese's withdrawal as editor of America magazine became public, that line from scripture was, in fact, the only thing that went through my mind. The official announcement, of course, is that Reese "resigned." "Resigned," in this case, apparently means "decided to go quietly" or was "talked into going" or was "threatened with more serious things than not going," like having a commission of bishops selected by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to censor the publication if he remained in his position as editor.

Whatever happens to Tom Reese, however much we care about the effect of such a move on an individual -- and there is no doubt that it is some kind of intellectual abuse at the peak of a distinguished career -- the truth is that it is we ourselves, the church itself, that will be most damaged by a power play of this kind.

This manipulation of the Catholic press, this assault on the quality and standards of Catholic journalism, will mark the church for years to come. In fact, it runs the risk of making the whole idea of Catholic "thought" an oxymoron.

Reese's mistake -- his error, his sin, whatever -- sources close to him and the magazine say, lies in the fact that he had the gall to publish two sides of every major issue even though, at the same time, he explained the church's position carefully. He published articles in America that looked at both sides of the communion-for-politicians issue, at both sides of the gay marriage issue, at both sides of the role of Congregation of the Faith, at both sides of the church as institution and religion.

Reese, professionals across the spectrum say, is a moderate and mild man. No raging anarchist, no raving heretic. He is a thoughtful man, a fair man and a competent one. He is a scholar and writer, a person who examines a subject from multiple perspectives so that others can do the same. He provides the background ideas people need to come to clear, firm conclusions of their own. He is, in other words, a good journalist.

As a result of such an ungraceful and professionally groundless ousting, therefore, the rest of us are forced to examine the role of Catholic journalism itself.

When someone such as this finds himself under pressure, forced to "resign" from Catholic journalism for being balanced, for being willing to publish other views, the rest of us stand to lose something, too, whether we realize it or not.

What exactly is such a move saying to Catholics, to the world, to those who look to us for honest thought about emerging issues? Is Catholic journalism only the catechism and Vatican

documents writ large? And if so, how can we call others to dialogue about difficult questions if we are not modeling it in our own publications, among ourselves, in non-contentious ways?

The Tom Reese resignation may well lead people to assume that Catholicism has simply returned to being -- in fact, has always been -- what they saw the church in the 1950s to be: closed to any other position but its own, no matter how much it says it seeks dialogue.

It may well signal to the world that we have already decided -- Galileo, and Modernism, the Inquisition and the Index notwithstanding -- that there is no other position but our position on anything, that we know the answers before we even completely understand the question, that we never have to update old answers to meet new insights or information.

It could be seen to say that Catholicism is static, that we have already determined that we never have to rethink the Catholic position on anything from interfaith marriages to fish on Fridays.

It may send the message that no thinking is acceptable whatsoever inside the boundaries of Catholicism, that Catholics are given every answer, they never have to suffer the embarrassing reality of having to come to one together.

It may indicate that we are not a self-critiquing institution now, any more than we were when the Reformers tried to question the selling of relics and the practice of indulgences and the chaining of the scriptures.

It may even suggest that growth in the Holy Spirit is not really our intention, however much we pretend to espouse it.

Indeed we must "weep for ourselves and for our children" if this is a sign of things to come. We have a great deal more to lose than Tom Reese does.

From where I stand, it looks like it's a sad day for Catholicism when America magazine becomes the kind of publication we choose to repress. The purpose of this magazine, for instance, is not to promote pornography or anarchy or hate mongering. the purpose of America is to promote thinking about the issues Catholics confront in society today. But thinking, apparently, is not allowed.

It seems that they did save America magazine. I'm just not sure why.