

More Catholic than the pope?

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Even prior to the Second Vatican Council there were Catholics who claimed to hold themselves to a higher standard of Catholic faith and practice than the rest of the church. However, they were usually dismissed by fellow Catholics for presuming to be "more Catholic than the pope."

Although we are now almost 40 years after the council's final adjournment in December 1965, that form of pretentious behavior has not died out. In fact, the attitude seems to have made something of a comeback in recent years. There are Catholics today --- some of them recent "converts" from various Protestant denominations and even from Judaism --- who think of themselves as better Catholics than most others.

Unaware of, or perhaps simply indifferent to, their own lack of theological sophistication, they confidently repeat one-liners --- Rodney Dangerfield-style --- from the old Baltimore Catechism or its equivalent on such diverse topics as papal infallibility, capital punishment, just war and sexual morality.

Sometimes their pronouncements --- occasionally seen on national television --- are so wide of the mark that they are simply amusing. One assumes that few in the viewing audience will remember what they said or will take them seriously in the first place.

Sometimes, however, their comments are appalling in their outright distortion of Catholic teaching. One wonders how many anti-Catholic prejudices their narrow and intolerant assertions conveniently confirm.

A recent case in point comes from Alan Keyes, a former presidential aspirant, a recently defeated candidate for the U.S. Senate in Illinois, and a one-time television talk-show host.

Mr. Keyes, who seems to prefer being called "Ambassador" Keyes for his brief stint (1983-85) representing President Reagan on the United Nations Economic and Social Council, is also a self-professed anti-abortion, anti-homosexual Catholic.

Following his crushing defeat in Illinois last November by now-Senator Barack Obama, Mr. Keyes receded from public view only to burst back upon the scene early last month with his highly publicized disavowal of his 19-year-old lesbian daughter, Maya.

Evidently it was not enough for Mr. Keyes simply to express his disapproval of her sexual orientation, as if she had chosen it in the same way that he had chosen, for example, to enter government service. He (with the approval of his wife, Jocelyn) also effectively disowned her, threw her out of the house, cut off her tuition support at Brown University, and stopped speaking to her.

Maya, who still appears in a family photo on Alan Keyes' Web site, had temporarily put off college and moved from the family home in Maryland to Chicago to be with her father in his quixotic campaign against the enormously popular Barack Obama. Even though Maya disagreed politically with her father on "almost everything," she worked hard for him in his losing campaign.

During that campaign, Keyes had also lashed out against Vice President Richard Cheney's lesbian (and openly partnered) daughter, Mary, calling her a "selfish hedonist." He also said that if his own daughter were a lesbian, he would characterize her in the same way, tell her that she was in sin, and urge her to pray to God to "help her deal with that sin."

Maya's reaction to her father's "hypothetical" comment was remarkably understated. "It was really kind of unpleasant," she said later.

Indeed, her father was actually aware of his daughter's sexual orientation at the time he made that comment. He had known at least since the end of her high-school days at an all-girls school in McLean, Virginia, operated by Opus Dei, an ultra-conservative Catholic organization, with which Alan Keyes and so many other "more-Catholic-than-the-pope" types are closely affiliated.

When asked by The Washington Post for a reaction to the controversy provoked by his remarks about his daughter, Alan Keyes' press secretary issued this brief statement: "My daughter is an adult, and she is responsible for her own actions. What she chooses to do has nothing to do with my work or political activities."

Her parents' reaction nonetheless surprised Maya. Her friends had assured her that "most parents would be thrilled to have a child who doesn't smoke, have sex, do drugs, hardly drinks..., does well in school, gets good grades, gets into the Ivy League..., goes regularly to church, spends free time mentoring kids."

Soon after her parents cut off her college funds, the Point Foundation, which provides scholarships for students marginalized by parents because of their sexual orientation, decided to pay Maya's expenses.

Meanwhile, she has been receiving e-mails from people, undoubtedly many of them Catholics, who confidently predict that she will burn in Hell.

Would the pope say that or approve of her parent's harsh behavior toward her? But, then, is even the pope "Catholic" enough?

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