

6-25-08 - Russert a model for ideal bishop: INTELLIGENT, HONEST | Church leaders lack credibility, seem rigid, arrogant, BY ANDREW GREELEY, Chicago Sun-Times

The obsequies for Tim Russert were a wonderful showcase for the Catholic heritage. They were the celebration of our memory of a man who exemplified the role of a Catholic layman and also a demonstration of how Catholics cope with death.

The Irish laughed at death while they were still pagans. When they became Catholic, this laughter turned into a privileged symbol of that faith. It's not everyone's symbol of death - - and it has its own imperfections -- but it is profoundly Catholic.

The Catholic Church has not looked too good in public lately -- it has often seemed mean-spirited, punitive, arrogant, insensitive. It seems not to understand what the sexual abuse crisis has done to its public image. Hopefully many who are not Catholic came to realize last week that there was more to be said about the Catholic heritage.

A Catholic wrote to me to ask why Catholic bishops can't be like Tim Russert: open, honest, transparent, intelligent, deeply concerned about people, respectful of others. I might have asked him if he as a Catholic layman practiced his faith the way Tim did.

Yet his point is well-taken. The simple truth is that if Tim had gone to a seminary after he graduated from college, he probably would have died as an assistant pastor in a parish in Buffalo. There is no disgrace in that, God knows. He would have made a wonderful parish priest. The point is that he was not the kind of man likely to be made a bishop in this country. The Vatican does not want men with his talents and abilities as heads of dioceses.

Sometimes they make mistakes and intelligent, honest and transparent men are in fact elevated, as we say, to the sacred purple. But not very often. And not in this time when, in the wake of the sexual abuse scandal, the church needs intelligent, honest and transparent leaders.

Thirty years ago, the American priest best qualified to lead anywhere in the world was Father Ted Hesburgh of Notre Dame. One of his predecessors ended up a cardinal, so there was even some precedent. No way a man with Father Ted's abilities could ever become a cardinal.

What we have instead is almost an epidemic of conflicts between bishops and priests and between bishops and laity. It is almost as though Catholic leaders want to say, in effect, "Despite our loss of credibility because of sexual abuse, we're still the bosses, we're still in charge, and you have to do what we say. . . . Got it?"

So the conflicts erupt in places like Belleville and St. Louis and St. Paul and Phoenix and Oakland and New York.

The assumption has always been that Rome knows what it's doing. The recent appointment of many bishops suggests that it has not yet grasped the impact the sexual abuse crisis has had on the American laity and clergy.

Rigid and arrogant canon lawyers are not what the Catholic Church in this country needs as the leadership strives to recover its credibility with its priests and people.

The curialists who show up in America and denounce the American system of law for having created the abuse crisis don't help either. It is almost as if the Vatican has decided that the laity and the clergy in this country don't matter. Or still are a mob of ignorant peasants.

It might be that they simply don't understand this country and protect themselves with cliches about "secularism" and "hypersexuality." Those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad.

And I wonder when they will give up their fiction that sexual abuse is only an American problem.