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The Archbishop and the Priest

Is Archbishop Michael Sheehan oblivious or indifferent to Call to Action activity under his nose?

By Stephanie Block

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Before he cleans up Phoenix, Archbishop Michael Sheehan has several matters at home to address. In response to an inquiry this spring about Fr. Richard Rohr from the Diocese of Allentown, Archbishop Sheehan wrote:

Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, has been invited to give a presentation at the National Young Adult Conference to be held in Albuquerque from Friday, June 13 through Sunday, June 15. Father Rohr is a very popular writer and presenter and is much in demand, not only in the United States but also other parts of the world, for his presentations.

Father Rohr sometimes can be controversial and has liberal views on different aspects of the Church; but at the same time he is also quite capable of very traditional and inspiring talks. Several years ago I had to meet with him to have a frank talk, as Bishop, on several matters that concerned me. He pledged that he would write articles that are faithful to the teachings of the Catholic Church and that his presentations would also carefully reflect sound Catholic teaching.

Since our discussion, Father Rohr has shown a positive response to the concerns that I raised regarding sensitivity to sound teaching. I have personally heard him give very solid presentations regarding the Catholic faith. I believe that he will be quite loyal to the Church in his presentation to the young adults at the National Conference in June. [\[May 2, 2003\]](#)

One salient point of Archbishop Sheehan's letter – that Fr. Rohr has pledged to write articles and give presentations that are faithful to the teachings of the Church since the time (“several years ago”) of the Archbishop's frank talk with him – bears examination.

Without knowing how far back the Archbishop's frank talk was, it seems fair to look at some of Rohr's writings and actions over the past three years.

SOME EXAMPLES: Church teaching is straightforward. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and contrary to the natural law. “Homosexual persons are called to chastity.” (CCC #2357-8)

Fr. Rohr has challenged this teaching – and done so recently.

In 2000, Rohr wrote a letter of support for the Soulforce-Dignity/USA protest at the November National Conference of Catholic Bishops meeting in Washington DC. The protest was organized against “the exclusionary policies of the Catholic Church toward GLBT [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender] Catholics, to ask the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to STOP SPIRITUAL VIOLENCE against sexual and gender minorities, and support the inclusion of GLBT Catholics into all aspects of church life.”

[\[Soulforce-Dignity/USA Press Release, October 19, 2000, emphasis in original\]](#)

[Rohr's October 8, 2000 letter of support](#) for this activity says, in part:

At last we have a group of dedicated Christians who are willing to use disciplined and Christian means of nonviolent protest against the church's failure to live the gospel...

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SOULFORCE must take the role of John the Beloved who runs swiftly to the tomb because that is what love always does....Our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered brothers and sisters have been left outside of his realm of grace for far too long. We can do so much better, and we will. I thank SOULFORCE for its courage, dedication and proclamation of Christian nonviolence in the pursuit of justice and truth.

[In 2001, Rohr wrote in Radical Grace](#), the periodical of the Center for Action and Contemplation that he founded, a defense of same-sex “marriage,” written four years after he performed a same-sex “commitment ceremony” at the Center. It was written after Archbishop Sheehan had spoken to him about the matter and had been assured that Rohr would mend his ways:

Without wanting to take sides here on this immensely divisive issue, one must admit that the mainline Christian position held by most of the churches against same sex marriage, with the exception of the United Church of Christ, creates a situation that in effect encourages the very promiscuity that it rightly condemns. (“On the Horns of a Dilemma: Catholic Teaching on Homosexuality,” *Radical Grace*, 10-12/01)

Clever bit, this. It presents Church teaching by questioning it. It disingenuously claims to have taken no side on the issue of Church blessings for same-sex unions, while presenting Church teaching concerning chastity as impossible – encouraging promiscuity rather than fostering virtue.

And the 2003 Albuquerque Annual GLBT Pride program book not only identifies Rohr’s Center for Action and Contemplation as its 2001 Pride Parade winner in the “Banner Group,” but lists it among those organizations that “Over the years...have been supportive of the GLBT community overall or Pride directly.” (pp. 23, 50, 34) The Pridefest is one aspect of the “fight against homophobia and ...the struggle for acceptance of who we are.” (p. 14)

ANOTHER EXAMPLE: The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms the value of freely chosen, consecrated celibacy. (CCC # 915-6)

Rohr, however, feels this is a “myth.” According to a piece published by [Sojourners July-August 2002, “Beyond Crime and Punishment,”](#) he writes:

Celibacy, at least in the male, is a most rare gift. ...Many who have ostensibly “succeeded” at it have often, by the second half of life, actually not succeeded in the sense of becoming a God lover, a human lover, and a happy man besides.

Practically, however, the demand for celibacy as a prerequisite for ministry is a set-up for so many false takers. Not bad men, just men who are still on a journey: young men who need identity; insecure or ambitious men who need status; passionate men who need containment for their passions; men who are pleasing their pious mothers or earning their Catholic father’s approval; men who think “the sacred” will prevent their feared homosexuality, their wild heterosexual hormones, or their paedophilia; men with arrested human development who seek to overcompensate by identification with a strong group; men who do not know how to relate to other people and to women in particular.

.... Many of us stay in not because we believe the official ideology of celibacy anymore, but because we believe in our work, we love the people, and we also know God’s mercy. But that loss of belief in the very ideology is at the heart of the whole problem now. We cannot prop up with law and social pressure what the Spirit does not appear to be sustaining. The substructure has collapsed.

....In general, I think healthy male celibacy is rare, and it probably is most healthy as an “initiation” stage to attain boundaries, discipline, integrity, depth, and surrender to God. In the long run, most men, as the Buddha statues illustrate, need to have one hand touching the earth, the concrete, the physical, the material, the sexual. If they do not, the other hand usually points nowhere.

.... We Catholics should also see celibacy as primarily an intense initiation course of limited (one to 10) years, much like the monks in many Asian countries

....Male sexuality does not go away. It is not easily sublimated or integrated. It is either expressed healthily or it goes underground in a thousand different ways. Sex is and probably always will be a central issue for most males, and it can never develop honestly inside of a “hothouse” of prearranged final conclusions.

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NATIONAL YOUNG ADULT CONFERENCE: There is a second salient point in Archbishop Sheehan’s letter to the Diocese of Allentown and that is his assurance that Rohr’s talk would be “loyal to the Church.” By inference, the reader assumes that the Conference itself will be loyal to the Church.

The Archbishop is, after all, the Episcopal Moderator for the National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association, which sponsored the Young Adult Conference in June. His was the hosting diocese. The Archbishop was also present for some of the conference, mingling among the young people.

Nevertheless, Call to Action (and also the CTA affiliate, Pax Christi) was listed in the conference program booklet as one of its “[Exhibitors, Sponsors, and Friends](#).” This was prearranged, deliberate sponsorship – not the work of some enthusiast who left literature on a table and ran.

Call to Action literature was also made prominently available to conference participants. On the exhibit tables, participants could pick up:

- [Call to Action Join the Movement brochure](#): explaining that CTA works in solidarity with Pax Christi, Women’s Ordination Conference, CORPUS, and Dignity, among others.
- [Call to Action brochure for Summer 2003 Retreat](#), ages 18-42,
- Call to Action information about [2003 National Conference](#), advertising speakers who believe that
 - the Church must accept homosexual relationships as morally good ([Marianne Duddy](#) with Dignity, USA; [Sr. Jeannine Grammick](#) and [Francis DeBernardo](#) with the New Ways Ministry; [Paul Morrissey](#) with CMI, a ministry for gay and lesbian priests and religious),
 - that the Church must ordain women ([Genevieve Chavez](#) with Women’s Ordination Conference),
 - the Church must accept married priests ([Anthony Padovano](#), former president of CORPUS),
 - liberation theology is a viable alternative to classical theology ([Jeannette Rodriguez](#), CTA Board; [George “Tink” Tinker](#)),
 - the Church must re-image the Divine ([Mary Kingsley](#) author of *The Prayers and Seven Contemplations of the Sacred Mother*; [Edwina Gateley](#) author of *A Warm, Moist, Salty God*; [Rosemary Ruether](#) author of *Women-Church* and *Sexism and God-Talk*),
 - Catholic laity must determine the conditions for divorce and remarriage, contraception, and the election of clerical positions ([Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church](#)).
- Samples of the April 2003 *Call to Action News* and the Jan-Feb 2003 *CTA Spirituality Justice*. The *CTA News* carried articles about [FutureChurch/CTA prayer services](#) that depicted God in feminine imagery, a play about [one woman’s “call to the priesthood.”](#) a book project titled “[Women of the Word](#),” a collection of “homilies” written by Roman Catholic women, and a photo of [Denise Donato](#), who “presides at Eucharist after her ordination...”
- Fliers advertising Call to Action and FutureChurch materials, including [Future of Priestly Ministry](#), a resource that prepares readers to “begin a dialogue” on issues of “celibacy in the church, women’s ordination,” and “infallibility.”

Whatever the quality of Fr. Rohr’s talk, the open, intentional presence of Call to Action literature at the conference stood in flagrant contradiction to the Archbishop’s assurances that Rohr’s talk would be “loyal to the Church.” This is every bit as devastating as if Rohr had given an openly dissenting talk. What has been “said” by such actions is that Rohr, his Center for Action and Contemplation, and Call to Action are entities to be trusted as reflective of the mind of the Church. After all, the Archbishop was there and he gave his word. ☛

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