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Sell art, and keep parishes open

By David D'Alessandro | July 9, 2005

Rome

IN ORDER TO help pay for generations of priests who abused young boys, Archbishop Sean O'Malley is abusing a new generation of children and parishioners. Closing schools and parishes and selling off the real estate to the highest bidder so that we can have more high-priced condominiums is doubly offensive.

Despite great criticism for allowing children to be abused, the arrogant, clueless, CEO Cardinal Bernard Law doesn't go to jail -- he presides over the magnificent Santa Maria Maggiore basilica here in return for toeing the party line. In his stead the Vatican sends a man who on the surface has just the right PR touch: a humble monk, with rough-hewn brown robes, sandals, and a pious manner. Supposedly, he's a contrast to the elitist Law. But is O'Malley any different? I think not. He is another instrument of the Vatican -- assigned to keep the scandal as far from St. Peter's as possible.

Perhaps being a disaffected Catholic makes me more cynical, but maybe it also makes me see a bit clearer, particularly here in Italy, center of the Roman Catholic Church. Not only is the church's powerful influence so prevalent in every city and town here, the breathtaking wealth the Catholic Church possesses in many cathedrals, shrines and holy places is overwhelming.

From Venice museums, San Gimignano's St. Augustine Church to Siena's Gothic cathedral, to thousands of small churches and shrines in places like Torcella, Pistoria, and Spoleto. They contain millions of antique artifacts ranging from bejeweled chalices to frescoes to statues to tapestries and ancient art in all forms. All owned by the Catholic Church before we even discuss the world's richest art collection -- the Vatican's. Within Rome's self-contained country, the mind-boggling Vatican art collection is housed in 1,400 rooms in 12 separate complexes. The total value is beyond any art expert's ability to estimate. Much of it unseen, some, all but forgotten, except for the busy Curia scribes who inventory its hundreds of thousands of pieces.

While, back in the Boston Archdiocese, the families who contributed and worked to help build, rebuild, and maintain their parishes are being evicted as the church cries poor. It is curious. The Vatican sets all the rules: Priests cannot marry. Gays cannot marry. Women cannot become priests. The divorced can not accept Communion without an annulment. Abortion is forbidden. Birth control is anathema. Rome creates the rules, but is not willing to accept responsibility for the actions of its employees -- criminal priests and their protectors.

During an age of increasing corporate responsibility -- more transparency -- recognition of stakeholder rights, the archdiocese is moving in the opposite direction. It complains of a lack of priests, decreasing parishioners, and money woes. Yet, its parent owns billions of dollars of art and artifacts hardly ever seen and of virtually no practical use except to art collectors. Why not sell to the world's private collectors and museums a few hundred sculptures, paintings, and artifacts? I am not suggesting the Vatican sell "the Pieta" or the Sistine Chapel's frescoes, but some of the archived material so obscure no one will care about it. There is enough forgotten art in Law's basilica to keep all of our parishes and schools open and create a long-standing recruitment campaign for new priests.

If Pope Benedict XVI is serious about the church being judged by its deeds, why not take responsibility for the sins of its employees -- the abusive priests and their superior protectors.

Why make the victims and the faithful pay the price when you have the means to do it yourself? What message does that send? We fail. You pay. And the church expects loyalty and trust in return?

These parish sit-ins and protests are a wonderful beginning to sending a message to the Vatican. Do not be fooled. O'Malley is but Rome's latest messenger, just like Law. Instead of a Basilica though, if he convinces people they must leave their parishes and schools, his reward will be a cardinal's red hat.

Protest publicly -- long and hard. Campaign vocally to deny him the red hat and Rome will get the message.

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