

Yes, We Do Have A Right To Know What Goes On In Their Bedrooms ...

“Private” Conduct and Public Knowledge – What constitutes “Good” Clergy?

There’s an idea (popularised by Canada’s PM Pierre Trudeau?) that the public, or perhaps the government - the people ultimately in charge - don’t have any right to know what goes on in politicians’ bedrooms, or rather, that those who have power/influence in our society can have a private life that need bear no relation to their public duty and public probity, and the public have no right to know about these things. Such ideas have been extended to the Christian Church, such that it is argued that no one (even a diocesan bishop) has any right to know what their clergy do behind closed-doors, and thus that “private” living, and private activities – whatever form they take – in no way affect the ability to be a good priest or minister, and should not be allowed to influence our understanding of the worth or effectiveness of the person’s ministry.

Needless to say, I question all of this. In what sense can a person be a “good” minister if they live, however discreetly, in some irregular relationship or in some endemically sinful way? What is a “good” Christian minister or priest? Is it simply someone who has a sympathetic, caring manner, whose skills in counselling, empathy and spiritual direction are outstanding, whose sermons are spiritual and thought-provoking? I think not. I think that such skills are just that – skills; they can be taught and learned, and even if being a caring, prayerful, lovely person are qualities that exist above and beyond any possibility of natural acquisition, they are still secondary, in my view, to personal virtue and holiness. Now ‘holiness’ is often thought of as some mystical other-worldly quality which only a few saints can acquire: *it is not*, it is something that we all can develop by discipline and obedience; obedience to the commandments and injunctions that God has given us, discipline to avoid the fallings and failures which tempt us all. We may indeed all be sinners, but the worst sinner of all is the person who uses that fact as an excuse not to try, indeed, to give in to any and all urges. A “good” priest is one who lives virtuously; failings as a parish administrator, preacher, or even counsellor and soul-friend, are secondary.

A bishop has a right to know that his clergy are people of honesty, consistency, virtue, and integrity. If he does not know – or wilfully avoids such knowledge (perhaps with the totally-erroneous notion that he is being “liberal”) - then he is not only failing the people of his parishes, but also failing God.

But moral inconsistency is not the only possible failing of clergy: I’d hate to discover that I’d once had a vicar of the kind you hear about, that – albeit secretly – doesn’t believe in the existence of God (the secrecy just makes it worse), but nonetheless recites the creeds, in public, regularly..

I can’t help thinking that some people might read the above and wonder when it was written; it might sound a bit old-fashioned to some people; if there are such people, let’s hope they’re not leaders of the Church.

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