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The Church and media

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It is always interesting and occasionally frustrating to see how the Church is portrayed in the media. Oftentimes, the Catholic Church gets a fair shake and very positive coverage, and we can only be grateful for the opportunity to share our message of good news with the wider public. But, there are other occasions when fairness seems to go out the window, and the Catholic faithful are made to look ridiculous at best and despicable at worst. Two recent examples come to mind.

The well-crafted BBC series “Wolf Hall,” which is now airing locally on PBS, tells the story of Thomas Cromwell, chief minister to King Henry VIII in 16th century England. Cromwell was a principal player in the Reformation in England and had a direct hand in separating the Church of England from the Pope. He was also instrumental in the destruction of Catholic culture in England and the persecution of any who maintained loyalty to the Pope and the Catholic faith. An interesting aspect of the plotline is the relationship of Cromwell to Sir Thomas More, another key advisor to the king. While Cromwell comes off as the reasonable man of good sense and integrity, the BBC portrays Thomas More as an arrogant snob and a religious fanatic.

But, personal and historical accounts of that time tell a very different story. Cromwell was, according to most historians, a brilliant and ruthless man who did great violence to the Church and to those who opposed him. Thomas More, on the other hand, was widely respected as a gentleman, a statesman, a scholar, a loving husband and father and a man of deep, reasoned faith. He was not a perfect man, but he was a great man. Due to his own integrity and fidelity to the Church, he could not support the marriage of King Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn, and he opposed the king’s rebellion against the Pope. Thomas More was willing to sacrifice his very life for this matter of truth, and he was beheaded at the order of the king in 1535. In fact, the Church canonized Thomas More a saint in 1935, and he continues to inspire those who strive for freedom of conscience and religion.

Viewers can draw their own conclusions about Cromwell, but hopefully they will not be taken in by his portrayal as a hero. And yet, it seems obvious that Thomas More has deliberately been made into a caricature, a straw man who represents all the throwbacks who would defend the Church, the Pope and traditional marriage. This should come as no surprise, since the author of “Wolf Hall,” a former Catholic, says the “Church today is not an institution for respectable people.” A writer despises the Church, and then retells a story to smear a holy man of the Church.

A different kind of smear appeared in our own “Forum” on March 25. The lead editorial that day chastised the North Dakota Catholic Conference (NDCC) for daring to raise objections against a bill in the legislature (SB 2279) that purports to give equal rights to all. Never mind that this bill would have seriously weakened the rights of people of faith. Rather than responding to the actual problems with the bill, the “Forum” resorted to a caricature and calls the objections “dishonest claptrap.” The Catholic Church was accused of “misusing the legislative process.” In other words, the “Forum” seems to say, we have no business bringing our views to bear or participating in the work of forming public policy. Christopher Dodson, the executive director of the NDCC, testified before the appropriate legislative committee, as many other organizations do on a regular basis. But, the “Forum” chose to portray this very common form of advocacy as

meddling with lawmakers and inserting our religious beliefs into the secular sanctuary of lawmaking.

How sad that a news organization like the “Forum” can’t imagine anyone having legitimate objections or reservations about this bill. And, how tragic that, in our state and nation where religious freedom is guaranteed, the “Forum” and other media and entertainment outlets would find it necessary to caricature people of faith or people who express their faith in a public way. How ironic that protection of rights is demanded by the “Forum,” unless one wants to defend their right of religious freedom and conscience. The “Forum” accuses the North Dakota Catholic Conference of “bullying,” but perhaps the editors of the Forum need to do a little examination of conscience. I invite everyone to read the testimony given by Christopher Dodson at the state legislature on SB 2279 at ndcatholic.org/testimony2015, and then read the Forum’s editorial (“Pass ND housing, jobs bill” - March 25, 2015). Who is really doing the bullying here? Who is really being dishonest?

These two episodes illustrate a growing trend in the news and entertainment media. People of faith are portrayed as bigots, haters or just plain ignorant. Catholics are demeaned and the Church is to be put in its place, where it will have no voice in public discourse. Fortunately, this is far from a universal pattern. The media often reports favorably about works of the Church and some of her leaders. Pope Francis, for instance, seems to be quite popular, even though many journalists tend to ignore much of what he actually says. There are many good, fair and talented people who work in the news and entertainment industries, and much of what they produce is of great value. But, when people of faith and the legitimate concerns of citizens are caricatured or denigrated by the media, they undermine their own credibility, and they deserve a response. I hope people of faith, and especially the Catholics of eastern North Dakota, will not be taken in by the distortions we are fed by those who inform and entertain us every day. And, I would encourage them to respond when they are unfairly smeared because of their beliefs. Certainly, we all know that we are a Church of sinners, but we have something to offer to society nonetheless, and we should not allow ourselves to be pushed out of the public square.

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