



McQuaid's O'Malley:

Who Says I'm Unorthodox?!

Father William O'Malley — Jesuit, teacher, near-star of the silver screen, director and self-described "big mouth" — has over the years evoked varied and emotional comments. The Courier-Journal occasionally receives calls and "tips," mostly anonymous, on his purported activities and views. This paper also has occasionally benefited from Father O'Malley's outspoken comments which we have published. But to get the bottom of the O'Malley rumors, editor Carmen J. Viglucci recently visited the Jesuit teacher on his home turf, his McQuaid High classroom. To get the correct flavor of this interview, the reader should realize that Father O'Malley doesn't simply jump from one subject to another, he bounds. He is alternately flip and deep, thoughtful and exuberant, reverent and iconoclastic, and often his answers are more challenging than the question.

Q. From time to time, the Courier receives phone calls, mostly from persons retaining their anonymity, which cast a doubt on your Roman Catholic orthodoxy. For instance, that you teach there is nothing wrong with premarital sex — or that you accept abortion. How do you respond to such charges?

A. First, let me say that I believe life is too short to pussyfoot. There is nothing I am more passionate about than the truth. As for your question, obviously the people who say those things have never been to my classroom. Two things I am unbending about — Kids don't have a right to premarital sex ... and as for abortion, why am I wearing this thing (a lapel pin depicting baby feet)? The things that gets them may be that I am not monolithic about these things. Pro-lifers say the fetus is human from conception — how do you explain that fertilized ova get flushed out in menstruation? We have no litmus paper that says that this is a human ...

The odds are that the fetus at conception will turn out to be human — it won't turn out to be a porcupine or a giraffe. It will be a human.

Look at it another way — if you go out hunting and you forgot your glasses and see something that may be a deer or it may be a person. You don't shoot.

It amazes me how anyone could be against the Vietnam War and for abortion — they say you can't use a bomb for fear of killing innocents. If so, then you can't destroy a fetus. The kids I teach are absolutely sure where I stand on abortion ...

I don't want it to be the truth that the fetus is human. It would be easier if it weren't — but I don't make the truth. Just the past period, I talked about abortion. Someone would have to be deaf not to have heard that I am against it. People saying otherwise are saying just the opposite of what I believe.

About sex ... the first step toward wisdom is calling a thing by its right name. Often I have found, especially with girls who find the whole thing either shaming or unpleasant or both, that the sex act is an act of "love." I say don't call it love-making, if it is mere animal coupling. There are far uglier words to describe two human beings degrading one another. If it is merely submission to someone for fear of losing him or her, don't call it "making love," call it "insurance" or "blackmail."

At basis, the reason I believe extramarital intercourse is sinful is that it is almost always a form of lying. No one deserves a repayment that intense unless he or she has made a life commitment which is equally intense.

No kid I have ever taught — and I've taught more than 2,000 young men at this place over the past 17 years — can say I was for premarital sex or for abortion ...

Q. Well then, how do these rumors arise?

Where does it come from? Because I am forthright, they say, "Oh, well, he must be a flaming liberal ..."

Bishop Sheen heard someone say that a priest said a Mass with hamburger and beer ... somebody must have said, "It must be that big mouth from Clinton Avenue South. He (Bishop Sheen) also heard that I had said a Mass lying flat on the altar. Ludicrous, of course, to say nothing of being esthetically ugly and physically impossible. He accepted my denial but yet, a year later, he still expressed to McQuaid's rector his uneasiness over reports of "unorthodox Masses at McQuaid."

“ It amazes me how anyone could be against the Vietnam War and for abortion ... ”



Q. How about you? Do you receive such anonymous calls?

A. No. No one calls me up anonymously any more. But in the past, someone, a charismatic called me, at the time I had been in the Exorcist, and said, "I really wish you could be touched by the Spirit." I said, "How the hell do you know I haven't been? Who are you to say I haven't been touched by the Spirit? You've never even seen me — I could have a tongue of fire over my head for all you know ..."

Anyone can come into my class any time ...

Q. You mean if they get an appointment first?

A. No — they can just come in unannounced. I wouldn't change anything an iota. I would use forthright language — they can walk in unexpectedly ... I've nothing to hide.

These things (rumors) — my mother used to call them feathers in the wind. She said to me, "When you tell a lie about somebody, it's like ripping open a pillow in the wind and letting all the feathers fly every which way. The person you tell it to tells five others and each of them tells five others, and on and on. How could you ever pick up all those feathers?" I wish some people in the diocese might have known her and listened to her story.

“ The reason I think extramarital intercourse is sinful is that it is almost always a form of lying ... ”



Q. What should people do when they hear such claims about teachers or priests or whomever?

I think they should ask the speaker, "Where did you hear that?" They should ask, "Were you there?"

People have said that I teach there is no such thing as mortal sin. I have never said that because I don't believe that. Once, two different parents called up the rector and told him that I had said that. Fortunately, I had my class notes. What I had said was: "I find it difficult to understand how many people, frequently in their lives, could perfectly fulfill the three requirements for mortal sin."

What had happened? All the nuances had fallen out. All some of my listeners had heard was the topic of mortal sin, with an expression of some half-heard hesitation — which they blew out of proportion into an out-and-out denial. Why? Because that's what they wanted me to say.

As Father John Courtney Murray kept telling us in class, "I don't say what I say, I say what you hear."

I had eight adult education classes. Those people know what I believe. I've written eight books — all with imprimatur. How did I fool all those bishops?

If I didn't believe in the things the Church stands for why I am I still in it? I have many married priest friends. Why haven't I? ... no, wait, they'll probably say because he's gay (laughter) ... Seriously, they think I should put on sackcloth and ashes as if I were guilty of something. I'm sure my teaching is orthodox, my methods may not be — I don't like to be boring.

Q. Have you ever contemplated legal action? Perhaps a charge of slander ... or libel?

A. No, never even crossed my mind. Life is too short to get tied up in legal battles. Why should I degrade myself to even admit people have said these things ... but it does hurt.

The people I met in pictures were always suing each other. It is so dumb. Who needs National Enquirer calling up?

“ If the Gospel doesn't scare you, you really haven't heard it yet. ”



Q. How long have you been at McQuaid and just what classes do you teach?

A. Seventeen years. I teach advance placement English and a course called "Meeting a Living God" on the existence of God. I tell them if you want to believe there is no God then your life should show it — it should have no meaning. The pope and a pimp would get the same distinction.

I never tire of this class. I'm always eager to get into it. I also do two shows a year — "Fiddler" was my 46th show (this year) as director. Two shows with the kids, one a straight play and then a musical. And a parents show.

I am either out of my mind or crazy. But it took me 32 years and two years with a shrink not to be afraid and I want to save these kids some time.

Q. How old are you?

A. I'm 50 now and I damn well deserve respect (laughingly).

Q. Do such smears linger on? Can they ever be erased?

A. They linger on. If those people making these accusations were to learn they're wrong, would they ever apologize? Would they feel guilty?

On birth control ... no one has ever heard me say publicly how I feel on it — no one. As More said, "Silence bodes consent."

When kids ask me, I say that I'm not going to talk about it outside of the seal of confession. I'm the pope's man: If he tells me to pack up and go to a leper colony, I'd go. So he certainly could tell me to shut up and I will. But I won't be silent to innuendo and hearsay.

I truly believe in mortal sin — and also in venial sins. But they don't come in bins ... as I said before, we talk sloppily. It's sloppy to say mortal sin destroys your soul —

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