



Allen, John L. Jr.

*A People of Hope: Archbishop Timothy Dolan in Conversation with John L. Allen Jr.*

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

If someone would have asked me a month ago who Archbishop Timothy Dolan was I would have been forced to admit ignorance. The same goes with John L. Allen Jr. Apparently, both are well known figures to Catholics and those interested in current events surrounding the Catholic Church. Archbishop Dolan is the tenth archbishop of New York and John L. Allen Jr. is a journalist whose focus is upon the Vatican and “all things Catholic” (which is also the name of a weekly internet column that he writes).

*A People of Hope* is a unique book in that it is part biography, part interview, and part anecdote, without actually meaning to be any of these things. What do I mean? Well, Allen begins the book with some bullet points on important events in the life of Dolan before moving on to describe the man with a series of vignettes, i.e., stories about the archbishop related to Allen by folks who knew him. He then moves onto to the first of three sections in which he sketches a brief biography (chapter 1) of Dolan up until this point. If one were to read these vignettes and the anemic biography provided in the first chapter then they’d come away thinking that Dolan had something of an ideal childhood and upbringing and that he managed to become some sort of superhuman figure into adulthood; the kind of guy that everyone likes or wants to be like.

The second section moves onto the interview portion of the book where Allen asks Dolan about a number of hot button issues such as the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church (chapter 2);

the role of women in the Church (chapter 3); abortion and gay marriage (chapter 4); politics (chapter 5); and the authority structures of the Church (chapter 6). Dolan does his best to answer these questions forthrightly—usually by recalling stories in order to illustrate his points—but one gets the sense that he’s just a bit too polished in his responses. Without charging the man with disingenuousness, I got the impression that he had his public image in mind as he answered, and that he sought to be as congenial as possible, not that there’s anything wrong with congeniality. He struck me as being more of a politician than a religious leader much of the time, but then again, I suppose his office demands that he be both.

The third section turns to ecclesiology more than anything else. Here Allen and Dolan discuss “affirmative orthodoxy” (chapter 7), i.e., what the Church says yes to rather than simply what it condemns; the role of the laity, or more accurately, all those Catholics who just don’t happen to be bishops (chapter 8); unity and diversity in the Church (chapter 9); the heartbeat of the Catholic ethos, prayer and the sacraments (chapter 10); why anyone should become or remain Catholic (chapter 11); and finally, the hope of the Church (chapter 12). This is decidedly the most theological section of the book and it really gets to the heart of what Allen wanted to do with this book, which was show what “affirmative orthodoxy” looks like in action. Dolan is a guy that likes saying “yes,” hence my difficulty with seeing him as less than a politician, and even when he does say “no,” it’s in the least offensive way possible; it’s always a “no, but...”

As I said above, if we were to take the words of Dolan’s acquaintances or Allen’s brief biography at face value then we’d get an idealized view of Dolan. Thankfully we’re exposed to Dolan himself, even though he’s definitely on guard and taking great thought about what he’s saying and how it will be perceived. But even in this we’re able to recognize that he’s not quite as polished as he might appear at first glance. When asked about the sexual abuse scandal Dolan rightly responded with dismay; how could he not? But then at certain points he seems almost oblivious to just how terrible these crimes were. For example, when Allen asks him if the penalty (or lack thereof) meted out to Bernard Francis Cardinal Law was a mistake, Dolan responds by saying:

No, I don't think so. Maybe part of the way I look at it comes from having lived in Rome. For Bernie Law to have given up the archdiocese of Boston was a heavy penalty. For anybody to see in Saint Mary Major some type of compensation for losing the archdiocese of Boston, that's just ridiculous. Now, to an outsider, maybe it looks like he's still exercising some kind of prestige in Rome. I guess marketing-

wise, somebody can say we should have thrown him to the dogs. But we're not just guided by PR!

I see Law as one of the great tragedies of this situation. In some ways, Bernie Law was a reforming bishop. I can remember when he was in Springfield-Cape Girardeau and [archbishop of Saint Louis] John Carberry was leery of him. He was suspicious of him, this kind of rebel down in the south of Missouri with these bold pastoral practices. [Law] took the tumble for this crisis. In the eyes of his critics, he became the Richard Nixon of the Catholic Church, didn't he? He became stereotyped as everything that's wrong with the Church, and those of us who know and respect him regard that as terribly unjust. Somewhere, too, we have to say that we cannot simply capitulate to a kind of viciousness, the insistence that this man needs to be drawn and quartered. It was a magnanimous gesture by Pope John Paul II to say that you're still welcome in the home of Peter, and you should be able to finish out your days with some trusted pastoral assignment, as minimal as it might be. As a factual matter, did it hurt us? I think in the court of public opinion, it did. Whether we should have capitulated to that public opinion, I don't think we should.

Keep in mind that Law covered up multiple cases of reported sexual abuse. It's almost inconceivable that one could be armed with such a knowledge and then respond as if Law was somehow the victim here for losing a large archdiocese and given a small parish in Rome! The point isn't what Law did right; it's what Law did wrong. Did the penalty fit the crime? Not even a little bit! Should the good priests and bishops of the Catholic Church be outraged over this? You bet they should! But apparently, Dolan isn't, and that speaks volumes; more than any vignette ever could.

But perhaps I'm being unfair here. As much as everything within me tells me that I should loathe all pedophiles (and those who help them in any way) with all of my being, my Lord says otherwise. Jesus told us to love and forgive our enemies and pray for them. As a Christian I don't have the luxury of harboring feelings of unforgiveness no matter how much they might seem justified. I'm not allowed to deny others the mercy and grace that I so desperately desire. So is the problem here more with Dolan or with me? Could this response really speak to Dolan's virtue more than his vices? When I say that this response speaks volumes more than any vignette ever could, I think that's a correct judgment, but then I have to ask, what exactly does this tell me? And that's a question that I can't answer in a book review.

But Allen isn't naïve and he doesn't leave the reader believing that Dolan is some kind of faultless individual. When Allen gives his own impressions of the man they're similar to my own. Allen says that Dolan is a nice guy, but he's no saint. He even suspects that much of his approach to dealing with people is subtly manipulative, and I have no problems believing that to be true. But this book wasn't so much *about* Dolan as it was something that Dolan exemplifies. In an afterword Allen lets us know what his goals were with this book and what they were not. He had no intention of writing a proper biography; especially because so much of the story has yet to happen. He didn't intend this as a hard-hitting interview that was meant to expose Dolan and the Church for all its faults. He likewise didn't intend it as a fluff piece to extol Dolan and all his virtues. What he wanted to do was show "affirmative orthodoxy" in action, and this can be seen, arguably, in no greater figure of American Catholicism than Archbishop Timothy Dolan. On my reading, Allen accomplished his goals.