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Canon 220 in the Catholic “Bill of Rights”: The Right to a Good Name and Privacy in the Church

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The 1983 Code of Canon Law, at the beginning of Book II of the Code, contains what many Catholic scholars have referred to as a “Bill of Rights” for members of the Church. Two of those rights are enumerated in Canon 220: “No one is permitted to harm illegitimately the good reputation which a person possesses nor to injure the right of any person to protect his or her own privacy.” So, under the Code of Canon Law, every Catholic is guaranteed a right to their good name in the Church and a right to their privacy in the Church.

The proper application of this canon would prevent individual Catholics from opining publicly, say to the media or in any other public way, e.g., a mass mailing, about whether or not another member of the Church was in fact a member in good standing of the Church. Only one authority in the Church has the ability to make these kinds of judgments, and that is the person’s own proper pastors, and these judgments when made are, in accordance with Canon 220, to be kept between the pastor and the individual. They are not to be shared with the public.

It is my opinion that Catholic politicians who, for their own political gain, state in a public fashion that other Catholic politicians are not “good” Catholics or “faithful” Catholics have violated Canon 220 and may, depending on the circumstances, be themselves subject to a canonical penal process for this violation of the law. Such statements obviously harm the good name of the person described, and the public fashion of the statement violates that person’s right to privacy as well. Further, who is or who is not a “good” Catholic is not, under the Church’s law, for other members of the Church to judge, but only for that person’s proper pastors and even then only in situations that protect the person’s privacy.

Links and Resources

See. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_PU.HTM