Public scandals affect reputation of Ave Maria University

By Marielena Montesino de Stuart

In less than a month, Ave Maria - founded by pizza tycoon Tom Monaghan - has been the subject of two “immoral scandals” covered by newspapers and television news. But this article is not about the details of these scandals, nor about the outcome of any arrest—which almost always involves lawyers and negotiators.

This article is about how these scandals, as well as the decisions and choices made by Ave Maria University, affect the public perception of Ave Maria Town.

The first scandal was covered by the media on September 7th, and it involved the “immoral conduct” of the former superior of an Ave Maria University-endorsed religious community on campus, called Home of the Mother, aka, “Hogar de la Madre.”

Then, on October 1st, the Naples Daily News published a story about an Assistant Baseball Coach at Ave Maria University, who had been arrested the day before, for “indecent exposure in public.” WARNING: The following link to the Naples Daily News describes the details of the arrest, which include graphic language and details.

The “university-town”

Ave Maria is a “university-town.” Given the symbiotic relationship between the town and the university in this isolated area of the Everglades, the decisions made by the university— and the repercussions of those decisions, can also affect the town.

Ave Maria has a large population of children. As in any community, children are always the most vulnerable when individuals that engage in “immoral conduct” are in their midst.

Case in point: the Home of the Mother religious sister who was accused of engaging in “immoral conduct” with a female university student, was also a teacher at Rhodora J. Donahue Academy, which is the local Ave Maria K-12 school. Other than the initial official comments made by AMU to the media, no further
information has been made public about the outcome of any investigation that may have been conducted about the Home of the Mother religious sister.

The religious sister in question was brought to Ave Maria by Ave Maria University officials, not by the Bishop of this diocese (this cannot be emphasized enough). Once the Bishop learned about the “immoral conduct” by this Home of the Mother religious sister, he confronted the situation— with consideration and transparency for the community of Ave Maria— by meeting with Ave Maria University officials, so as to “determine if there are other victims and help any student that might have been harmed.”

The community of Ave Maria— and society at large, deserve the same degree of consideration and transparency from Ave Maria University, concerning the hiring of the Assistant Baseball Coach who was arrested last week, as well as information regarding his presence in Ave Maria— regardless of the outcome of the arrest.

**Questions**

It is a pointless task to attempt to make sense of many of the decisions made by the administration at Ave Maria University, which has former pizza tycoon, Tom Monaghan, as its Chancellor, and maritime lawyer, Nicholas J. Healy, Jr., as its president. This leaves no other choice but to ask questions.

So, I submitted a media inquiry to Mr. Healy containing nine questions. I requested that he respond in writing. I spoke personally with him on Monday morning (Oct. 4th) when I called to confirm his receipt of my media inquiry. He answered the phone, but declined to answer any questions, saying that I should address my inquiry to the “proper channels”—then hung up. His handling of the phone call would make an interesting study in the history of university presidents.

I then submitted the letter to the Director of Marketing, Deacon Forrest L. Wallace, as per the protocol indicated by Mr. Healy, during last month’s Home of the Mother scandal. I had to assume that this was the “proper channel.” Which begs the question—why are these “immoral conduct” scandals considered a “marketing” issue, at a university that claims to be “unabashedly Catholic”? Is it all about public perception? Maybe it is time to switch the “channel.”

Here are the nine questions I presented to Mr. Healy:

1. Have you [Mr. Healy] ever personally met the Assistant Baseball Coach who was arrested last week?
2. Did AMU conduct a background check on the Assistant Baseball Coach, prior to hiring him?
3. Was there anything in his background that indicated he should not perform his work as an Assistant Baseball Coach, without supervision?
4. During the hiring process and in consideration of his position as an Assistant Baseball Coach at AMU, did Ave Maria University ask if he ever had the adjudication of guilt withheld to a crime (felony or first degree misdemeanor)?
5. Did AMU request character references, other than prior employers or relatives, before hiring this individual?
6. Had there been any irregularities or concerns about this individual, expressed to Mr. Healy or to other officials, faculty members or staff, at AMU?
7. Where did this individual stay during the time that he was performing his work.
Public scandals affect reputation of Ave Maria University

7. Where did this individual stay during the time that he was performing his work at AMU as an Assistant Baseball Coach? Did he stay at the AMU campus dormitories? Did he stay off-campus at a home or property in Ave Maria? Please note that “stay” can be any time during a 24-hour period.

8. Did this individual come in contact with minors in Ave Maria, on or off campus?

9. Will Ave Maria University, through you [Mr. Healy] or through AMU lawyers, provide legal assistance to this individual, or refer him to legal counsel?

The following is the response that I received from AMU’s Director of Marketing. Notice that the statement does not mention the name of the Assistant Baseball Coach who was arrested, and the only reference is to “the part-time employee.” Mr. Wallace wrote in an e-mail that this is the statement that they provided to others:

Statement regarding employee issues.

The university has been made aware of the situation with the part-time employee. Our protocol is to await the outcome of the legal process prior to taking any definitive action. Until the matter is resolved, the employee in question will be on a leave of absence. Ave Maria University protects the confidentiality of matters relating to our students, faculty and staff, and it is our policy not to discuss specific details of personnel matters publicly. Thank you for your understanding.

[Signed]: Ave Maria University

It is preposterous for AMU’s administration to respond with such a generic “marketing” statement. The questions presented to Mr. Healy do not violate the confidentiality of the Assistant Baseball Coach—given that the circumstances of his arrest are a matter of public record. Ave Maria University can only benefit by being more transparent about the hiring of this coach, and his presence in this community.

Long-standing concerns about Ave Maria University’s administration

On February 17, 2009 I wrote a commentary titled “Open Letter to the Ave Maria University Board of Trustees” published by the Naples Daily News, where I included my concerns about how the decisions made by the university’s administration could affect the town. I’m still waiting for an answer to the questions that I posed in that open letter.

Ave Maria University’s influence over Ave Maria Town was very well asserted by the university’s president, Nicholas J. Healy Jr., in his famous quote from The Angelus, titled “University, Town Set Precedent Long Lost in Europe”:

“What kind of university will this be, which will determine the character and ethos of Ave Maria Town?”
— Nicholas J. Healy Jr., President of Ave Maria University

If we are to believe Mr. Healy’s prophetic statement, then we have cause to be concerned over the latest “immoral conduct” of individuals hired by Ave Maria University.

But if marketing and perception is of such importance, then the public also needs to take note of the following marketing fact: Ave Maria University is NOT a Catholic university, and cannot even call itself a “Catholic university” on its own website, no matter how some may spin it.
The Bishop of the Diocese of Venice in Florida has never issued official Catholic recognition of Ave Maria University. The question is—why?

**The community of Ave Maria**

It is no surprise that Ave Maria University officials have again declined to answer basic questions, just as with the scandal involving the religious sister from Home of the Mother.

But have property owners in Ave Maria considered that news about an AMU employee being arrested for indecent exposure in public could affect their property values even further—in an already depressed economy?

Even though the arrest took place in Naples, how can any family feel encouraged to bring their children to Ave Maria, with news such as this, about someone employed by Ave Maria University?

The reader should be aware that “indecent exposure in public” is only the general description of what has been made public. This writer is refraining from describing the severity of the circumstances described by the Naples Daily News and television news—leaving such offensive details to other media outlets.

It is important to note that former employees, who did nothing more than oppose Tom Monaghan’s decisions, were publicly referred to as “academic terrorists.” An amazing difference, when one considers Ave Maria University’s statement about the “protection” and “confidentiality” extended to this coach, who was arrested for indecent exposure in public.

Will Ave Maria University stand behind this Assistant Baseball Coach, just as they stood behind the Dean of Students after he was arrested in 2009? Lawyers stepped in, and the charges against the Dean of Students were dropped—but the news and the circumstances of his arrest were also widely covered by the media.

Is the leadership of Ave Maria University listening?

Tom Monaghan and his Ave Maria-brand administrators have been under criticism for many years now. Their decisions have been at the center of the criticism. One of the latest scandals in Monaghan’s bag of decision-making, has been the naming of a building in honor of Tom Golisano, an individual with a notorious history of monumental financial support of pro-choice institutions and hard core pro-choice politicians—including Barack Obama. This decision, and the criticism that continues to this day, affects the community of Ave Maria.

And now there is the Jackson Lab scandal, and its proposed move to Ave Maria—which received a “go ahead with it” from Tom Monaghan. It has been reported that Monaghan made the land available for its location in Ave Maria. This decision, and the criticism that continues to this day, also affects the community of Ave Maria.

The Jackson Lab has a dark history in eugenics, and is involved in holding workshops and providing resources for Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research. There is a battle raging in Collier County over the Jackson Lab proposal of using millions of taxpayer dollars in order to bring this lab to Ave Maria.

How can university administrators who boast that AMU is “unabashedly Catholic” support the Jackson Lab project—when the Bishop of the Diocese of Venice in Florida has voiced his strong moral concerns about this lab? But Ave Maria
University’s administration remains unmoved by the bishop’s publicly stated opinion. And Catholic faculty members at AMU have not voiced any public opposition to the Jackson Lab proposal—neither in defense of the unborn, nor in defense of taxpayers. Meanwhile, the Jackson Lab is not hiding its agenda. Charles Hewett, VP of the Jackson Lab, stated to the Naples Daily News on April 10, 2010, “We certainly are very thoughtful about the subject, but not willing to rule out doing human embryonic stem cell research.”

In the same article, the Naples Daily News published the following statement, by AMU’s president:

“If they [The Jackson Lab] were to locate here I think there would be very considerable benefits to the entire area,” said Nicholas Healy, president of Ave Maria University. “They will bring well-paying jobs and so on. It will help real estate in the town.”

Silence in the town

Ave Maria was conceived, designed and promoted to the world as a “university-town.” Most of the residents moved here in support of that concept. Given the relationship between the university and the town, one would think that more transparency would exist regarding decisions and choices made by the university, which may impact the public perception of Ave Maria.

Any community, particularly one with so many children, would be signing petitions and demanding public answers from those in charge of employing or endorsing individuals, who end up in the news because of “immoral conduct.” Why is the community of Ave Maria the exception?

Randy Engel, a highly acclaimed investigative journalist recently wrote:

“I find this silence to be unnatural and a bit unnerving. It is the same kind of silence one associates with religious cults. Who or what are the people of Ave Maria afraid of?”


The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author only, not of Spero News.