

Civility, respect should be our aim

Nicholas P. Cafardi | Mar. 30, 2009



Nicholas P. Cafardi (CNS file photo)

It was hard not to be moved by Pope Benedict XVI's recent *cri de coeur* on the Catholic world's reaction to his remission of the excommunication of the Holocaust-denying Bishop Richard Williamson. "I was saddened by the fact that even Catholics who, after all, might have had a better knowledge of the situation, thought they had to attack me with open hostility," the Holy Father wrote in a letter to all the bishops in the world.

A lot of the criticism of the pope's action came from the United States: bishops, priests and laity alike. Welcome to the politics of the American church, Holy Father.

Yet we would be missing something much deeper were we not to pay attention to the Holy Father's point: Why would his fellow Catholics presume his bad faith? Why would they, who know him better, not give him the benefit of the doubt?

As the vitriol of the last presidential campaign proves, we in the American church have forgotten how to give our fellow Catholics the benefit of the doubt. Those Catholics who supported the Democratic ticket for what they honestly believed were social-justice concerns consistent with Catholic teaching were pilloried by a vocal portion of the Catholic pro-life movement for deserting the cause, as if there was only one way to be pro-life.

[Column by Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes: Political Catholicism vs. Christ's Catholicism](#) [1]

A few weeks ago, a U.S. senator, a convert to Catholicism, sponsored a letter distributed by a supposedly Catholic think tank claiming that a number of his fellow Catholic senators -- whom the letter named -- could no longer be considered good Catholics because of their votes on issues on which the senator (or whoever the author of the letter was) claimed that there was only one orthodox Catholic way to vote.

There is even a Web site where American Catholics can sign a petition to the U.S. bishops to withhold the Eucharist from "prominent Catholics in public life" who don't vote on political issues as these Catholics think they should.

We all need to take a lesson from the Holy Father. Yes, one could malevolently interpret his lifting of Williamson's excommunication as support for the bishop's Holocaust denial. Or one could give the Holy Father the benefit of the doubt and think he had perfectly valid ecclesiastical reasons -- like ending a bothersome

schism -- for what he did.

It is not moral relativism to say that the complex world of church schisms or American politics is not a world of either/or but a world of both/and. We live in a world of shadings and nuances. And when folks don't act exactly the way we are politically or ecclesially disposed to act ourselves -- even when it is the Holy Father, or especially when it is the Holy Father -- it is almost always a good idea, one might even say a Christian idea, not to presume the worst and jump to a personal attack on the person's motives and character. As Pope Benedict himself said to the priests of Rome, "Catholicism has always been considered the religion of the great 'et et' ['both/and']: not of great forms of exclusivism but of synthesis."

Fundamentalism, political or theological, has no place in the Catholic church, and when we use such standards to judge one another, we are simply being self-destructive. Or, as Pope Benedict concludes his letter to the world's bishops, quoting Galatians: "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you bite and devour one another, take heed that you are not consumed by one another."

Nicholas P. Cafardi is a civil and canon lawyer, and a professor and former dean at Duquesne University School of Law in Pittsburgh.

The companion essay to this commentary is [Politicizing Communion harms interests of the church](#) [2] by Thomas Patrick Melady.

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