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Iran Makes Me Think of the Vatican

Maureen Fiedler | Jun. 19, 2009 NCR Today

I am mesmerized by the Iranian citizens, most of them young, who are marching in the streets of Tehran. They show courage, spirit and a deep desire for justice. I?m especially intrigued by the women, many of whom are letting their head scarves slide back on their heads. A good number, I am sure, believe that the ?hijab? is not essential for Muslim women. In that highly religious nation, this crowd clearly wants a government that reflects the best of Islam, the best of what their religion has to offer.

All this makes images of St. Peter?s Square flash through my mind. I recall in the late 1990s, marching through that square with hundreds of Catholic reformers from all over the world. We too wanted justice: justice in our church, such as gender equality in all ministries, optional celibacy for priests, and the right to elect our bishops. None of us wore veils, but if we had, they would have been slipping, you can be sure. We wanted a church that reflects the best of the Catholic tradition.

True, Iran is not the equivalent of the Vatican. Iran is a nation-state, and can put physical force behind its demands. The Vatican, although technically a ?nation,? is really a seat of ecclesial power, with no physical security forces (only psychological ones) to enforce its will. But both are theocratic and although both have traditions of democracy in their history (yes, we did elect bishops in the church at one time), and neither seems to embrace the meaning of that tradition.

In Iran, at the traditional Friday prayers on June 19th, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader who can overrule everyone else, essentially told demonstrators that the recent election was legitimate, and that they should cease and desist. He rejected demands for a new election.

It reminded of that day many years ago in St. Peter?s Square, when our message too fell on deaf ears. Neither Pope John Paul II or Benedict XVI has moved the church toward gender equality, optional celibacy or any semblance of church democracy.

Why is it so difficult, I wonder, for absolute religious leaders to listen to the sensus fidelium (the sense of the faithful), or to change? Maybe it has something to do with the word, ?absolute.?

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