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Ecumenism as a Cover Story

Ken Briggs | Oct. 28, 2009 NCR Today

Some analyses of the "welcome home" party being thrown for dissident Anglicans refer to the pope's invitation as the culmination of ecumenism.

That sounds to me like calling the invasion of Iraq a product of the peace movement.

Ecumenism implies good will and mutual respect. The gallery of historic Protestant churches (silly me thinks they're actually churches) have trooped to reconciliation talks with Catholics for decades. They come up with wonderful agreements and lasting friendships. When these accomplishments get to Rome, however, they have been either called deficient or reduced in importance.

The green light to angry Anglicans is, therefore, indicative of a general disrespect Rome shows toward the rest of Christianity. The price of dialogue is capitulation to the Roman Catholic Church, pure and simple.

The Reformation churches have reason to be furious at this slap in the face. They've played the part of fools in thinking ecumenical talks meant something other than surrender.

Christians have always played one-upsmanship, of course. One group lords it over another, regions square off and disputes go on, as we know, for hundreds, even thousands of years.

Loyal Episcopalians/Anglicans have not exactly been above this kind of cloying superiority and arrogance. They represent mainly the upper crust of Americans who have a habit of putting on airs. Evangelicals have often treated mainline Protestants with disdain, and the reverse has also been true. The playing field is rife with sharp elbows.

But the current flap over Anglicans expresses this unfortunate attitude of superiority in a more universal way. Pope Benedict XVI, in his landmark assertion, *Dominus Jesu*, declared flatly that the Catholic church is the only "church," shunting others aside as pale imitations.

Since both the pope and the rebellious Anglicans share similar kinds of elitism, they'll get along fine. Just don't call it ecumenism.

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