

How to Get Them on the Same Page When They're Reading Different Books

Ken Briggs | Nov. 19, 2009 NCR Today

Law and Order, Dissidents Unit, starring Cardinal Francis E. George as chief enforcer, and a repertoire team of U.S. bishops.

Religion is a messy affair, and the messiness tends to take on a dialectical quality. In Catholicism, strong central control stands in tension with flexible, personal freedom. In America, where Catholicism met its first major challenge in a democratic setting, the decentralized pole has strengthened at the expense of hierarchical authority.

Cardinal George, in the first session of the annual bishops' conference, signaled that the bishops have felt the time was right to again assert their authority. He and others have demanded that Catholics affirm what the church says about major issues like abortion or quit calling themselves Catholic.

He also serves notice to Catholic publications and universities that it's time to examine whether they're worthy of the name. Already before the meeting, Bishop Thomas J. Tobin of Rhode Island rebuked Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) for disagreeing with the church on abortion rights.

Since the protest by a few dozen bishops over the University of Notre Dame's awarding an honorary degree to Barak Obama, a supporter of legal abortion, last spring, the bishops have been widely seen as having lost control over institutions such as Notre Dame which bear the Catholic name.

For that and other reasons, therefore, the American hierarchy has sought to overcome that perceived diminution in their power. The high point so far was their apparent ability to sway the leadership of the House of Representatives to accept an addition to the health care bill that effectively ends most payments for abortions under private plans.

Cardinal George's declaration of Catholic standards at the bishops' meeting may become another major success, though the odds are against it.

He and the bishops who stand with him have a valid point. If tradition counts for anything, then it has criteria that followers of that tradition should respect. The questions are: what criteria are essential and what not so? what is the role of conscience as emphasized by Vatican II? is total conformity possible?

The attempt by the vertical dimension of Catholicism to regain greater cohesiveness in the church is understandable even as it's inconceivable in a society that idolizes "choice." The bishops' motives may be good but their tactics could be disastrous. The idea of bishops taking steps, as Cardinal George said, to "strengthen our relationship to Catholic universities" sounds exactly the opposite of what institutions proud of their academic freedom want to hear. With more "friends" like these ...

The bishops' effort to promote unity under central authority takes place over against Catholic populism and the

quasi-Protestant movement toward personal understanding of spiritual life that is decidedly decentralized and, if you will, democratic.

Lately I've been reading Fr. Richard Rohr's book, "Things Hidden: Spirituality and Scripture," which evokes an approach to Christianity based on inner experience while rejecting a self-centered approach to spirituality. The goal is union with God through encounter rather than routine, rote performance of religious laws for the purpose of personal gain. Internal submission to God through Scripture and prayer collapse the dichotomy between the outer and inner lives. As we relate to God, so we relate to people, he says. He distrusts the authoritarian form of church rule while endorsing the dialogic style.

"Conservatives, in my experience," Rohr writes, are those who over-rely upon outer authority, while liberals tend to over-rely upon their own inner authority. Maturity, as always, is that 'third something' in between, a spacious place that is offered by God and grace, leaving neither of us totally comfortable."

Right now it would appear unlikely that mediating terms like Rohr's would satisfy Cardinal George and his allies. They are looking toward a model of hierarchical certitude that brooks no exceptions. Meanwhile, the American landscape is a profusion of just such exceptions.

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