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Move ahead by stepping back?

Joe Ferullo | Nov. 30, 2009 NCR Today

Can you move ahead by stepping back? Two articles in Sunday's New York Times seem to explore that question -- and present challenges to certain factions
of the church.

The first report is not about religion at all, but focuses on South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsay Graham. Not long ago, Graham was a darling of the far right when (as a member of the House Judiciary Committee) he helped lead impeachment proceedings against President Clinton. But recently, Graham has become a voice of centrism and civility on several issues -- and segments of the GOP in his home state is having none of that.

The Times' article [1]contrasts Graham to South Carolina's other Republican senator, Jim DeMint -- who instead of compromise seeks complete party purity, and has the true-believers rallying around him.

This is not an uncommon thing is politics -- Democrats did much the same during the Reagan era, insisting they were placed in exile by voters because the party was not left-wing enough. Purges and purity ruled the day, until Clinton and the centrist Democratic Leadership Council began pulling things back to the middle. It seems when an organization loses power, the instinct is to retrench, to move forward by stepping back into what is comfortable and familiar -- even if that means fewer people follow along. According to The Times, Senator DeMint has said he would prefer having fewer, but more ideologically pure, Republicans in the Senate, rather than Republicans who were ideologically suspect.

If this sounds familiar, that's because similar sentiments have been attributed to Pope Benedict and his acolytes in and out of the Curia. Also in this Sunday's Times [2]is an op-ed piece by Catholic writer Kenneth Wolfe, bemoaning liturgical changes to the Mass dating back to 1969, and celebrating a return of the Latin Mass to many Catholic parishes.

Read Wolfe and you get the clear impression that all problems afflicting the Catholic church can be laid at the feet of Vatican II changes; it all began to unravel when priests turned around to face their congregations. It's much the same in tone and philosophy as the article about South Carolina Republicans: only by returning to the grand old days of yesteryear can power and authority be reclaimed. If smaller numbers result, so be it.

I get why Republicans feel this way -- they went from controlling all the levers of national political power to controlling none. This will change, of course, but for now, things are hard and retribution is sought. But I am not sure why segments of the church insist on this approach as well.

In the forty years since the liturgical changes of 1969, the church has indeed shrunk, especially in Western Europe. But research clearly shows continued authoritarianism has been the catalyst for this: from loud edits against birth control to the hard silence surrounding abusive priests. More authoritarianism doesn't seem to be the answer.

Now, I actually think making the Latin Mass available again is a good thing. Along with Masses in English and

Spanish and Italian and Tagalog. If a faction of Catholics crave Latin, if that brings them closer to the church -- well, why not? But that's me being all misty-eyed and inclusive -- writers like Wolfe don't want that. He proclaims Mass in the vernacular a source of "chaos and banality" and clearly feels it should be done away with.

Politics are very cyclical: run people out of your tent, and they have a chance to muscle their way back in every two or four years. Religion is not that way: chase people off, and you risk losing them not just for months or years, but for generations.

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