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What truly divides the church isn't traditionalists and progressives

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Apr. 26, 2010 Bulletins from the Human Side

Catholicism is routinely described by the media as if St. Peter's fronted on the O.K. Corral; the white smoke rises not from a papal election but from the daily gun battle between so called traditionalists and progressives over grazing rights to the famous Square. At other times the latter are termed conservatives and liberals. Religion writers may soon describe them as Vatican Firsters or Vatican Seconders.

The real split in Catholicism, however, has nothing to do with such exaggerated distinctions. Traditionalists and progressives share a belief in the same creed and express the same impulses to service and love of neighbor that are the pulse beat you detect everywhere in Catholicism.

Catholicism actually resembles a family that survives because even as it aspires to holiness it understands and can live with sin and imperfection. So it knows how to get through periods when some members don't speak to each other, or exchange Arctic glares when members are seated at the wrong tables at weddings, funerals, or reunions.

The fork in the road of Catholicism leads one way to what is healthy and the other to what is unhealthy. You don't even need a sign at this crossroad divide to know which way leads to health and which to unhealthiness.

You feel the contrast immediately because one way leads to a warm sunny countryside; take one step and you feel free and comfortable enough to continue on your own on what seems a natural journey. The other path bends and twists toward a chill and clouded destination; take one step and feel so uneasy that your glib guide must talk you into continuing.

How do we know that something is healthy and something else is not? We can follow St. Thomas's advice to "Trust the authority of your own feelings." The world and other people register on a radar-like set within us that picks up true images and signals about their character, their intentions, and what they want from or are doing to us.

Healthy people give off healthy vibrations that we sense immediately. They make us feel comfortable and at ease with them and ourselves; they do not throw a lasso around us to rope and tie us for some cause or need of their own. Above all, we feel safe and free in their presence. That is healthy and it cannot be faked or counterfeited.

What is unhealthy in the way others relate to us also registers on the screen of our feelings. They may be intelligent, fluent, and unyielding in the attention they pay to us, but there is always a nimbus, a hazy edge that makes us uncertain about what they propose or what they want.

Healthy people should pay close attention to these dissonant signals; they are warning signals about whether the other person is interested in us or in how he or he can manipulate or use us. Unhealthy people or movements are out to gratify some need of their own and they use their persuasive skills or their superior position to achieve this. They are very good at it; they know how to dodge and weave as they keep circling their prey. Another

signal from the unhealthy is their readiness to abandon the other person once they have got out of them what they want.

In the church, the prime example of what is unhealthy is the dynamic of the sex abuse scandal. Those with power use it on those without power in order to gratify themselves. The unhealthy abusers seek out healthy or innocent victims who are vulnerable because of their age or position to their manipulations. They do not view the healthy as persons but as objects and they toss them aside, with no feeling for those they have victimized but a great file of rationalizations for their own unhealthy behavior.

Unhealthy maneuvers are not confined, however, to sex abuse. They are found in array of activities and their common denominator is that unhealthiness, sometimes cunningly hidden, in the person who teaches, supervises, or preaches to some group. The sex abuse problem that is now making the pope cry in public has made hundreds of thousands of believers cry in secret over the way they have been abused in Church life.

The sex abuse crisis is not going to be solved by lawsuits, child-protection pledges, or any other initiative. It will yield only to the diagnosis of the unhealthy element wherever it is found in the church. It can be identified by the way the unhealthy make healthy people feel -- condescended to, humiliated, manipulated -- whether at a church service or a church social. The pope can weep on like Rachel and speak of our need to repent. Nothing will happen until the church recognizes and does something about the unhealthy strain that truly divides Catholicism.
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