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I'm in Charge Here, No?

Ken Briggs | Jun. 30, 2010 NCR Today

Mel Brooks proclaimed "it's good to be the king" as he pranced around as Louis XVI in "History of the World Part I," oblivious to the fate that awaited him.

The Revolution was about to separate his head from his torso, but there he was, in full divine right glory, denying reality.

Benedict XVI, on the other hand, must have no illusions that it's any fun being the religious counterpart, the supreme pontiff, both because he isn't a sinister hedonist and no doubt understands fairly well that the natives are plenty restless.

Still, he or his support staff persist in portraying the papacy in medieval, royalist privileges that alienate it further from the egalitarian ideologies that undergird, at least in theory, the modern world.

I refer to the pope's insistence that he alone is entitled to rap the knuckles of cardinals. Another cardinal may not. Let's be clear, as President Obama might say, I'm the pope and, in case you forgot the rules, I'm the critic in chief. The rest of you keep your sniping to yourselves, or at least within the college of cardinals dining hall.

When you have to remind the world of your rights, chances are you've lost some of them and your command is slipping.

Small potatoes, you say. It's just protocol. Maybe, but such magified little gestures often indicate why things go wrong.

Feeling the need to point out who's in charge of what in this case undermines what's left of the "people of God" imagery that so many Catholics took seriously during and after Vatican II. The Council used it to signify the founding metaphor, but more traditional heads have prevailed.

The pope and his team prefer to reinforce the metaphor of fortress Catholicism where the chain of command curtails certain forms of speech like open debate among even the princes. The Vatican, therefore, in trouble, reasserts its pattern of feudalism in an age that simply doesn't buy it except, of course, in the culture of corporations where profits and economic dominance trump any pretense to Christianity.

Once long ago, bad-mouthing the English king was outlawed and violators risked lots of things including their lives. And the English, generally speaking, had done more to permit free speech than other Europeans. But they drew the line at threatening the king's "divine right" aura. America's founders, in reaction, abolished such protections in the First Amendment's guarantees of free speech and press. Jefferson was gung-ho in favor of it; later as president he took his lumps from those who practiced it.

Most Americans, I assume, believe that open airing of ideas and views is essential to the body politic. Most Catholic Americans, I likewise assume, believe that orchestraiting and sometimes suppressing ideas and views

by Vatican authorities smacks of an earlier, more backward period that seems odd, if not irritating.

At the very least it should ramp up speculation about what the minds under those red hats really think of each other.

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