

Papal Form and Papal Function

Ken Briggs | May. 14, 2012 NCR Today

Once it stung a little to be relegated to the "separated brethren" bin, though that was an upgrade from previous consignments. These days the group consists largely of Catholics themselves, "brethren" having been rendered gender-free and openly at odds with the church of their upbringing.

I was reading about a Protestant version of drawing lines -- fights among some Baptists who have a long tradition of casting one another out of the true-believer fold. Whereas the Catholics maintain a hierarchical structure that makes the modern corporation's lines of authority look tame, the Baptists run their affairs mostly on a grass roots level, though a power elite often exerts decisive control. The point is that the way churches are governed is no guarantee of outcomes or of shared authority.

The legitimacy for various practices of authority will be debated till kingdom comes I suspect, and will rest on Scripture and tradition. In that connection, it's fascinating and troubling to witness the drastically altered role of the Pope in practical terms. The rationale for the papacy is that it's a sign and symbol of unity. In a fractured world, that has a strong appeal. Not long ago, the pope functioned that way within a conception of Catholicism which placed the dissenters, Protestants and Orthodox, beyond the pale.

Those boundaries have become more blurry now as the pope's ability to unify has suffered serious decline. Increasingly, the pope is understood first as a source of disunity. The rebuttal is, of course, that the vicar of Christ on earth can do no other than proclaim the truth and that the burden of disunity belongs on those unable to accept it. Fair enough. In order for that to be a sufficient answer, however, it would be necessary to simplify and impugn the motives of a growing number of Catholics who feel alienated and to assign a degree of infallible authority to circumstances where it doesn't properly belong.

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