

Bishop Blair on 'Fresh Air'

Maureen Fiedler | Jul. 30, 2012 NCR Today

On June 25, Terry Gross, host of NPR's interview program "Fresh Air," interviewed Bishop Leonard P. Blair of Toledo, Ohio. He is one of two bishops named to assist Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle in providing "review, guidance and approval, where necessary, of the work" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. He was interviewed a few days after Gross spoke with Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, LCWR's president, on the same program July 17.

But if anyone was looking for "fresh air" from Bishop Blair, they found none. He repeated the Vatican's stance of the "assessment" of LCWR, and -- though he called for dialogue on difficult issues in the church -- showed no willingness to have a serious exchange of views that would entertain any new ideas. Indeed, he seemed wedded to the idea that the "fundamental teachings" of the church can never change.

Bishop Blair and others might usefully read a book I edited (with Linda Rabben) and published in 1998. It's called *Rome Has Spoken: A Guide to Forgotten Papal Statement, and How They Have Changed Through the Centuries*.

Using the actual texts of official documents and papal statements, it contradicts Blair's (and others') basic thesis: Church teaching never changes. Oh, yes it does! It is wonderfully instructive, for example, to read the actual statements of popes and councils as they strongly defended slavery for centuries, then to hear Pope Leo XIII in the late 19th century say, "From the beginning ... almost nothing was more venerated in the Catholic Church ... than the fact that she looked to see a slavery eased and abolished which was oppressing so many people ... She stood forth as a strenuous defender of liberty ..." (Letter to the Brazilian Bishops, 1888).

Now, of course, Leo XIII was not accurate in his history, but the teaching on slavery (dare I say, a key moral issue for centuries) changed.

The same is true of official view of the Jewish people, evolution, ecumenism and usury. Of course, some official positions changed to a more conservative stance as well (married clergy comes to mind), but the fact is, change has happened -- even in core moral teachings, like the one on slavery. So when we deal with issues of sexuality and reproduction and the status of women in the church, history testifies that change can happen and will happen.

Only when we admit that is real "dialogue" within the church possible.

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