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The challenge in San Francisco

Thomas C. Fox | Oct. 5, 2012 NCR Today

I try to see the hand of the Spirit in life?s events. Yet I must admit these are tough times to recognize Her work and plans for our church.

Fifty years ago this month the Second Vatican Council opened. It eventually celebrated two fundamental ideas: collegiality and the importance, if not primacy, of the local church.

Five decades later, these ideas are routinely being trampled upon by prelates in Rome who give absolutely no consideration to the desires and cultures of the local churches. To the contrary, some of their actions seem to show contempt for local Catholics.

Consider, for example, the installation of former Oakland Bishop Salvatore Cordileone yesterday as the ninth archbishop of the San Francisco archdiocese. He was plucked out of Oakland by the Vatican almost before he could memorize the names of the parishes of that diocese. The notion a local shepherd could surface from within a local church is anathema to the puppeteers in Rome.

By most reports Cordileone is a decent man. Yet he is the wrong choice to lead the San Francisco archdiocese. His choice, it must be said, is an assault against the idea of local church primacy. His choice shows near contempt for the desires of local San Francisco Catholics.

Cordileone was known for his out-spoken public opposition same-sex marriage, the civil rights goal of the overwhelming majority of San Francisco area residents.

In 2008, then an auxiliary bishop of San Diego, Cordileone reached out to wealthy donors and helped raise $1.5 million to get Proposition 8, a California constitutional amendment that defined marriage as between a man and woman, on the ballot. At the time he told a Catholic radio show that ?the ultimate attack of the Evil One is the attack on marriage.?

The San Francisco archdiocese is made up of three counties: San Francisco, Marin and San Mateo. The three counties lead the state in rejection of Proposition 8, with 75 percent voting against it in San Francisco and Marin, and 61 percent expressing their opposition in San Mateo.

The Cordileone choice was not a pleasing choice to the Catholics of the Bay area. It was message to them and not a particularly pastoral one at that. It was a power message: ?You are wrong and we are going to set you right.?

If our bishops were not so judgmental, if they were known instead for their pastoral kindnesses and concerns, certainly their influence would grow.

Unfortunately, it is Vatican power plays and episcopal edicts that we get. It is the threats to withhold sacraments and demands to exit Catholic properties we hear so often.

But I keep hoping. My hope now is that Cordileone will have a conversion of sorts. It might be too much to expect he could rethink his take on our church?s antiquated and harmful moral theology as it pertains to sex, a theology that unreasonably demands lives of absolute celibacy for all gay and lesbians.

Is our all loving God this pernicious?

However, is it too much to think Cordileone might allow charity and pastoral concerns to be his ultimate guide? Might he allow room for Catholics of varied sexual orientations to come together in community and prayer to celebrate their lives?

Cordileone's installation came only three days after he pleaded guilty in San Diego County Superior Court to a misdemeanor reckless driving charge that stemmed from an August drunken driving arrest. No doubt, that was a humbling experience. No one is perfect. So it was a chagrined Cordileone who was installed yesterday.

So back to the Spirit. How might she be at work here? Time should tell.

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