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An end to the small-tent movement in the church?

Joe Ferullo | Feb. 19, 2013 NCR Today
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Small tents don't work in national elections -- that's one of big lessons from the vote in November and one Catholic leadership may want to consider heading into the upcoming papal election.

The November ballot may have marked the "end of a Catholic Moment," according to Ross Douthat [1], a Catholic and right-of-center columnist for *The New York Times*.

Douthat writes that Catholic thought about values and social justice enjoyed a few years of ascendancy that coincided with Benedict's papacy, as both left and right looked to the church for foundations on which to build programs and strategies. But that moment ended and Catholic ideas have become marginalized, Douthat says, because of the growing sex abuse scandal that has left the church morally compromised.

That is true, as any Catholic who has suffered through the endless parade of horrifying headlines can attest. But there's a lot Douthat is leaving out.

He wants to be seen as coming to his readers from the "Sensible Center," so Douthat severely downplays what's really been going on over the last eight years. Catholic leadership actually chose to marginalize itself by identifying with the Republican evangelical right-wing. Democrats, especially those on the left, were not courted by but rather excoriated by U.S. bishops, who shouted from the rooftops about things like denying Communion to progressive politicians.

Both church hierarchy and GOP top dogs placed heavy bets on a small-tent approach. Republicans played continually to the hardest core of their base assuming they would be enough to carry them to victory -- but that didn't work. The base came out, to be sure, but everyone pushed out of the tent walked across the street to hang with the other guys.

Small tent has been all-the-rage during Benedict's papacy, as well -- an emphasis on strict doctrinal interpretations that broker no disagreements or real discussion. U.S. leadership couldn't even attract American Catholics with this "love it or leave" atmosphere, let alone spark a larger movement outside the church. Poll after poll shows American Catholics continue to disagree with the stands church leaders have chosen to make their hallmarks over the last few years, including health care reform and access to contraceptives. These issues didn't have to define the church in America -- the leadership simply made the wrong bet.

In a democracy, there is always another election on the horizon, a fresh chance for those out of power to find a path back to the center. The church is no democracy, of course, but -- as fate would have it -- it now finds itself in a position not unlike their old allies in the GOP. There's a papal election very much on the horizon with a chance to reshape the conversation.

I'm not a betting man, and so far the odds are against it, but I've always liked a long shot.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/opinion/sunday/douthat-the-end-of-a-catholic-moment.html?_r=0