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Christian Ambivalence Over Simplicity

Ken Briggs | Apr. 10, 2013 NCR Today

The pope's example of simplicity speaks to one of the most enduring gripes against Christianity: that it lavishes money and luxury on itself in defiance of Jesus' teachings. Whether the complaints are real or used as an excuse for rejecting Christianity, they have become a steady barrage of accusation that the church is hypocritical.

The line is whisker thin between justly honoring God (Martha's sister Mary anointing Jesus' feet with expensive fragrance) and honoring the vanity of church leaders. The New Testament itself draws line between celebrating things of this world and warning against the worldliness of urges for power, wealth, pride and domination. Over the centuries, Christians by turns honor simplicity, consigned it to those who embrace it, like Franciscans, or abandon it for one kind of "abundance" argument or another.

At the moment, Pope Francis occupies center stage on the subject. His moves to shed his office of material excess indicates a willingness to de-emphasize the "thiniginess" of the church so as to soften at least some of the critics of its history of opulence.

Meanwhile, Governor Rick Perry on Easter Sunday helped inaugurate a $130 million gleaming augmentation to First Baptist Church in Dallas by exclaiming, " Let me add my profound 'Wow'. This is quite a place -- and the way we do it in Texas." Nearby stood the pastor, the Rev. Robert Jeffress, whose name will be emblazoned on the waterworks plaza that centers the monument. Located in the heart of Dallas, it contains a worship-concert auditorium, corridors of spacious attractions and frontier technology.

Pastor Jeffress had stirred a hornet's nest of publicity weeks before the grand opening. His anti-gay declarations had led Tim Tebow, the model evangelical quarterback who shunned controversy, to cancel his speaking engagement at the church. The pastor had also taken aim at Mormons and Catholics.

But nothing of those discouraging episodes dimmed the celebration. The mayor also joined the festivities, echoing the theme that the sparkling new enterprise would be a boon to downtown Dallas.

For those who aren't enchanted, there are shades of what was once called the "edifice complex," bold initiatives to show the town that you were someone to be reckoned with, a success story after the American dream. In the Middle Ages, they built cathedrals out of the same batch of mixed motives. The results are often architectually magnificent; the question always is whether they're Christian. Would Francis have scoured the realm for funds to erect St. Peter's? It's impossible to know. The temper of the times would have been a huge factor. Is Paris' Notre Dame a trophy to God or human kind or both?

Inevitably, the mundane gets mixed up with the sacred so it's often hard to know proportions. In the case of First Baptist, and many other church drives to put themselves on the map, it's easier to figure out.

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