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When They Do Things Behind Your Back

Ken Briggs | May. 7, 2013 NCR Today

Everybody knows what Cardinal Joao Braz de Aviz went through. The lordly office that polices doctrine pulled rank on him, lowering the boom on American sisters without telling him.

We've all been left out of the loop. The picnic plans got switched, unbeknownst to us, or the boss crossed us up by ignoring to mention that the plum job we'd expected was going to someone else. The varieties are endless.

Cardinal Braz de Aviz says the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith dumped the indictment on the sisters without informing him and he's now gone public about it.

The flurry of reactions ranged from "inappropriate" to "heroic" An insider within the pressure cooker conformity of the Vatican had broken ranks and protocol by griping about the treatment he and, by implication, the sisters had received.

It was bold but did it deserve heroic accolades?

From this corner, it doesn't. The cardinal's honesty distinguishes him. He stepped out behind the secrecy and tore the veil of unanimity. All to the good. But to be courageous would have been to cry foul at the time of the foul. It is mildly commendable to say that it pained him to sign on to the punishment but embarrassing to admit that he signed anyway. The horse had already left the barn by the time he professed regret. A waiter in a fancy restaurant who found tainted food but was ordered to serve it anyway might gain favor by reporting it later, but meanwhile had delivered the spoiled fare in opposition to his conscience.

By the time Braz de Aviz told his truth, it would appear that he'd already become a lame duck and the Vatican quickly denounced his account.

Fear rules in most organizations, but Rome has a distinctive and long history of keeping its subjects in line. Deference is the lone reflect permitted. Conscience must somehow serve deference. An after-the-fact objection by one who is no longer an insider is a mighty weak witness for reform. When has it ever been?

It's true that Vatican II came about because John XXIII liberated the cluster of reform minded theologians who had been pressing their cause. But they were willing to risk reputation and standing -- and were often silenced -- in the midst of the conflict.

The Brazilian cardinal, a good man by every account, hasn't gone that far. He's irritated by the process, not the content. Perhaps Francis is listening and motivating to change direction, though his actions so far likewise reflect process more than substance. If the optimists are right, that's prelude to real change to come.

Meanwhile, suppose for a moment that as the CDF was still designing its crackdown on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious that Cardinal Braz de Aviz had led a chorus of protest openly and loudly. Could it have made a difference?

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