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Which Way to the Church?

Ken Briggs | Nov. 4, 2013 NCR Today

One of Cardinal Borgoglio's notable comments on the eve of his election was that Jesus is itching to get out of the church into the wider world.

His intent seems perfectly clear. The Catholic church had become so inwardly looking that it had forgotten its mission. Catholics surely get the message and it's a good one as far as it goes. To this non-Catholic Christian, however, it also reflects the nagging problem seized upon by the Reformation.

A piece of that uprising by Luther, Calvin and the rest was that Christ existed outside of the confines of the Catholic church and that the Holy See, in particular, was falsely claiming that the Lord was the exclusive property of the institution that surrounded it. The idea that Christ existed primarily within the whole created order had faded from the collective memory (with barely a nod to natural theology). The counter claim was that the church wasn't the sole authorized dispenser of divine gifts of salvation by being the mediating sacrament. The church had thereby wildly inflated its importance in the scheme of salvation, said the grizzled protestors, and it was time to break that stranglehold.

Protestants went on to establish various versions of that entitlement, of course, but the point remains valid in my view. Jesus stands at the door and knocks, to recall the famous picture, to the Christian world and the non-Christian world in the person of the Holy Spirit who often tries in vain to get a word in edgewise. Often the churches have accepted this outsider's prompting only after resisting forever. Churches only accepted racial equality after kicking, screaming and punting for hundreds of years. The call came largely from outside the church. Jesus knocking in the persons of human rights defenders. The same could be applied to the history of women and seems likely to unfold in the case of gay and lesbian dignity.

Not everything that knocks is by way of the secular world, to be sure, and that requires discernment. But at least it begins with the premise that no church can lock Jesus up as His sole guardian. Borgoglio was speaking to a particular audience about their brand of presumption that keeps them from seeing the wider picture. That picture is one in which the church does not impose itself as Jesus keeper but Jesus servant, alert to house calls from beyond itself to understand what it ought to be doing. The greater audience of Christians would welcome a further sign that the remaining "one true church" roadblock is being dismantled and that rather than letting Jesus out it can let Him in.

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