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Pope? What About the Pope?

Ken Briggs | Mar. 4, 2013 NCR Today

While much of the country chattered about the drama at the Vatican, barely a word about it was spoken at the National Religious Broadcasters convention in Nashville.

There were two allusions caught by a trio of observers, but they both were asides about Benedict's foray on to Twitter and in neither case was the pope's name actually mentioned.

Otherwise, Rome seemed a galaxy away among this gathering of hundreds of radio, television and electronic media professionals, most of them stolidly conservative evangelicals.

The fact that the Catholic church's troubles and saga received virtually no attention was itself news. The broadcasters as a whole have their roots in a passionate Protestantism that once railed against Catholics and denounced "popery" in particular. Catholicism was commonly condemned as apostate even as Protestants were scolded by Catholics for being outside the "one true church." Not that long ago they might have been belonged to churches that took a certain delight in Catholic troubles as if it vindicated their own rejection of that tradition. But there was no sense of triumph; no apparent desire to revel in the woes of their distant cousin Christians.

An attitude of relaxation and tolerance bordering on benevolence is notable and easy to miss, therefore, especially in an age of historical amnesia. Not ecumenism, exactly, but a measure of peaceful coexistence.

Absence of hostility wasn't as striking, in fact , as was the downright good will toward Catholics in many discussions. These are among the evangelicals whose fight against abortion, same sex marriage and a range of causes associated with the family embrace Catholics who share those views. They have become staunch allies.

At the largely subdued broadcasters' convention, the Obama mandate insisting that non-exempt Catholic institutions must provide birth control resources for employees without cost to the institutions has become the major flash point. It is the main exhibit in an effort to demonstrate that American religious groups like theirs are under attack. The assumption has become widespread among the participants, evoking a level of passion in the midst of their struggles to deal with erosion of Christian commitment and huge challenges posed to their ministries by technology and growing difficulty of reaching young people.

The struggles go a long way toward distracting participants from the contretemps in far off Rome, to be sure, but their inattention to the big stage at the Vatican is perhaps at least as attributable to a major, if sometimes overlooked, step in the right directions in relations between once bitter rivals.

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