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Pastoral Is as Pastoral Does

Ken Briggs | Jun. 23, 2013 NCR Today

The post-Vatican II era has revealed the word "pastoral" as a decidedly fluid term. It introduced some of the Council's major documents. it was the active ingredient in new functions such as parish and diocesan councils. Nothing surpassed it as a sign of a church that would be more sollicitous of the non-ordained voices and those who previously hadn't been quite accepted in the fold. it was the chief sign of a flatter, more collaborative way of a pilgrim church that had trimmed its triumphalism.

Confusion followed, because for every instance where such upgrading and participation of the laity took place, there were a multitude of false promises where ordained leadership used the right language but maintained power in the guise of disingenuous "hearing" of Catholics in the pews. The pastoral image among many of them assumed that listening meant taking their views seriously rather than an iron fist in a velvet glove The suggestion was that the laity could actually have a hand in shaping church teaching, though the resounding rejection of a broad consultation's decision to recommend acceptance of artificial birth control by Pope Paul VI put many on notice that "pastoral" had clear limits at best.

Under John Paul II and Benedict XVI the operating assumption was that bishop as "pastor" meant holding the line while assuring the faithful that priests and bishops would hear them out. The matching assumption was that whatever dissent the faithful spoke could be countermanded by a positive assertion of the "truth" of existing doctrine. Flexibility was no longer a live option; justification of established catechism was.

Pope Francis now embraces the "pastoral" image anew, and appears to reflect its hybrid meanings superbly. He's a man whose compassion draws toward him those who might otherwise shun the trappings of more regal prelates. He looks and acts like a bishop who would listen to testimony not only from the pious and hopeful but the downtrodden and atheistic. Who might show genuine sympathy toward the couple who plan to limit the size of their family out of concern for endangering the welfare of the children they have already. Who would hear not only the cries of the poor including their rage against injustice both inside and outside the church. Who would feel at home with a gay couple.

But he also seems like a man who would, with regret perhaps, insist on the letter of the law in what he told them or ruled in their cases sitting before him. Who would find a gentle way of saying that the church knows better than their complaints or agonies might lead them to believe. Who would, in short, wince at the letter of the law but feel compelled to affirm it. Who might even suffer twinges of conscience.

What does this imply for his choices of "pastoral" bishops? Those with great sensitivity who finally have to accept doctrine as unbending? Those like some post-Vatican II priests who gave silent approval to users of artificial contraception? Pastors in the traditional manner who felt responsibility to preach the church's doctrine without hinting that the "vox populi" might change things? Or reformers who would amplify that voice into a movement that challenged in faithful and civil fashion how the church understands the "people of God."

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