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A Social Justice Conclave

Ken Briggs | Aug. 9, 2013 NCR Today

Assuming the pope means to follow through on his appeals for the church to shoulder responsibility for the poor and downtrodden, a dramatic display of determination to do so would seem necessary. The form it might take would be for the pope to convene a call to action in Rome that would consist of two major emphases: exploring the content of Catholic Social Teaching and mustering strategies for implementing its imperatives.

Catholic social thinkers and ethicists from the theological side could rub shoulders with a broad category of activists from around the world, creating a visual statement that said the church meant business in confronting those forces that cause and perpetuate injustice and death. It would have to be massive and fervent enough to place corporate corruptors, agents of squalor and oppressive regimes on notice that their practices in degradation are under siege.

Given the global scope of the cause and the attention given it by religious groups of many stripes in relation, the participants would include non-Catholics and secular voices that could challenge and supplement the Catholic Social Teaching approach.

Theorizing and conceptualization would serve as the platform for devising strategies for combating the forces of de-humanization that crush vast populations. The targets would be mainly economic exploitation, environmental ruin and political repression.

The church would thereby carry out what the pope has projected as the centerpiece mission in his papacy. It would put substance on the vows and allow Catholicism to stand up and be counted on behalf of the "least of these."

Naive? Sure, but not inconceivable. A conclave of that kind would affirm Catholic principles, not contradict them. It would lift a largely ignored aspect of Catholic thought into the forefront in matters such as defending the right of workers to join unions. In other words, it wouldn't be foreign to the conscience of Catholicism but a natural expression of it. The fact that the church has been slow and spotty in moving ahead on a practical front and has even kept CST somewhat under wraps constitute no barrier to trumpeting its crucial significance now.

One inevitable consequence which surely gives Rome the quivers is that discussions of justice within the secular realm have a way of spilling into the church itself. Oppression within Catholic practice cannot be relegated to a separate realm. At the same time, such a focus could allow purgative attention to be paid to such crises as child abuse. But by calling a world wide assembly on thought and action on standing up against instruments of human misery, the risk could be well worth taking.

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