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The Newark Checkmate

Ken Briggs | Sep. 24, 2013 NCR Today

Appointing what amounts to a co-bishop in Newark is a reminder what a disingenuous tool that maneuver remains.

The move allows the Vatican to reprimand a sitting bishop without acknowledging its intentions. It's designed to protect the incumbent. and to avoid charges of wrongdoing by sanctified leaders. That makes it an odd strategy for a pope who has declared his disdain for special treatment and privilege for the hierarchy.

Not that this formally face saving ambit exactly saves anyone's face.

The fresh face in Newark, Bernard Hebda, in some ways resembles the last celebrated interloper, Donald Wuerl, who was dispatched to Seattle in 1987 to put the clamps on Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen who was targeted by Rome for his liberal interpretation of church teachings toward gays and women, among other things. It was generally viewed in Catholic circles as a public shaming. Wuerl moved in, took over vital functions, and went on his way to Pittsburgh, then Washington. His reputation, like Hebda's, was of a bright, Vatican marinated young cleric with a bright future replacing a older, censured outcast. Then it was Hunthausen, the progressive, now Myers, the unpopular conservative. The reasons for Vatican action is very different in each situation, and the validity of the cases against the two men are as diverse as is their merits and characters. But both unfairly became subjects of an awkward and unnecessarily demeaning punishment.

Rather than drag the resident bishop through the discomforts and embarrassments, a straight forward, candid process of removal would erase an element of Vatican secrecy and subterfuge, something Francis appears to desire, and candidly allow Catholics to judge for themselves whether or not justice were done. And the covertly accused bishop wouldn't at least wouldn't have to suffer from trial by rumor.

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