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Could 'mea culpa' help solve the government shutdown?

Joe Ferullo | Oct. 8, 2013 NCR Today

We were saying the Confiteor at Mass this weekend when it suddenly dawned on me that this prayer could solve the shutdown mess in Washington along with all the other political games being played there lately.

It was right at the central moment of the prayer, where we beat our breasts three times and confess misdoings "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault."

This prayer has long stood as the poster child for Catholic guilt, especially the Latin: "mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa," which has been used by ironic hipsters as a way of saying, "Hey, dude, calm down, it's no big deal, sorry, OK?"

Reactions to that line reveal a deep-seated human trait: It is hard for us to admit we are wrong. The prayer itself seems to understand that, putting the apology in there three times, building to the crescendo of "this is very very much my fault."

It's almost as if the liturgy is asking us to practice this out loud in a group, like a Greek chorus in rehearsal, so that when the moment to admit a mistake hits us in real life, we'll know exactly what to do.

Unfortunately, and despite the growing number of Catholics in Washington these days, the lesson has not sunk in.

Imagine if the instigators of the government shutdown were able to stop, look around, bow slightly at the waist and beat their breasts three times while owning up to the grand folly they have brought down on their nation. What if the people behind anti-Obamacare doozies such as "death panels" did the same thing?

It would then come to a halt, wouldn't it?

Now, this inability to admit error is not a new nor solely Republican phenomenon, of course. History is littered with mistakes and misunderstandings that become solidified into horrible policy because no one had the ability to simply say, "My fault; I'm really sorry." Most wars could be stopped this way, and nearly all bad laws.

Maybe we do this: Maybe we gather donations in through *NCR* and print up as many T-shirts as we can, emblazoned with a simple slogan: "Mea culpa." We then hand them out in Washington, D.C., to just about anyone we see: legislators, administrators, lobbyists and spin doctors. (We should print out a few "Mea maxima culpa" shirts for certain people. They know who they are.)

Mea culpa. Throughout the nation's capital.

It could catch on. I pray it does.

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