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Thoughtfully disturbed by Francis' approach to liturgy

Tom Roberts | Dec. 28, 2013 NCR Today

In an early morning stroll through a corner of Catholic blogland, I ran across this piece [1] by Andrew Haines at his Ethika Politica, and I found it an endearing essay by someone who is obviously and honestly struggling with the less formal approach from his predecessors that Pope Francis brings to papal liturgies.

I admit up front that I do not spend much time watching papal liturgies, not those of Francis nor his predecessors. And when I did in the recent past, I found what others might consider precision and uplifting attention to detail that enhanced a sense of the sacred to be rather prissy and overdone. They always seemed to me to be owing more to royal courts and secular ambitions of ages past than to any sense of the gospels.

I prefer Francis?s stripped down model approach to the papacy, liturgy, preaching, and papal exhortations. At the same time, I become as unsettled by the sense floating about that those who like Francis?s approach have somehow ?won? something as I do by those who preferred the style of Benedict XVI suggesting that Francis is merely on a continuum with his predecessor when it is evident that he is doing so many things differently. And yet I know how tempting it is to see things in that win-lose way, particularly in the U.S. church that finds itself deeply divided in some circumstances. Chalking up wins, however, hardly seems the way to building a healthy community.

So I was intrigued to come across Haines? essay in which he expresses a certain ?pain? in watching Francis?s liturgies. It would have been easy for him, who so loved Benedict?s approach, to dismiss Francis. Instead, he reflects on what may be a disproportionate or misplaced emphasis in his own life on the value of liturgy unconnected to real people, real circumstances outside church walls. I found it a courageously candid bit of introspection:

?Without supposing to know the Holy Father?s heart, it seems clear that the celebrated liturgy, to him, is viewed as something incomplete in itself. That?s not to suggest, of course, that he considers it somehow deficient. Rather, in approaching the liturgy, Pope Francis seems always to have in mind its connection to real effects, both in the soul but also in the flesh.

?We can talk all day about the theology of liturgy?which I?ve done many times?connecting its ordination to transcendence with the possibility for deeper prayer and more profound acts of charity in daily life. And it?s all true?and hopefully even productive of real wisdom. Yet isn?t there always something unnerving about leaving that reflection to pursue the inglorious work of serving others? No matter how much we know of the liturgy, its beauty and meaning, rarely does such awareness ever prepare us well to set it all aside and to take up the sullied practice of service.?

Read the entire piece here. [1]

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Links:

[1] http://ethikapolitika.org/2013/03/19/the-popes-painful-liturgies/?gclid=CLDe6-Py0rsCFeFlOgodpHAAJg