

If pope wants justice why probe those who walk the walk?

Ken Briggs | Jul. 10, 2009 NCR Today

Whatever attention deficit some Catholics may think their church has suffered has been more than made up for in the past weeks. Obama at Notre Dame, the pope's social encyclical and his meeting with the president have stirred enough coverage to convince those who have felt neglected that the Roman Catholic church is back to its proper place as the true church.

Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical is heartening to me mostly because it affirms what previous popes have said about justice. He doesn't try to correct or refute their basic appeals to right the wrongs of the global economy or to inculcate humanity where there has been little or none. To the glee of liberal Catholics, he sticks it to the Neo-ConCaths as did his predecessors, arguing that a free wheeling capitalism fosters greed and suffering.

The weakness of the document is that it doesn't offer more specifics for Catholic action on behalf of justice. That was a criticism of the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on the economy in 1987. Guidelines would be valuable as would some suggestion that refusing to act on behalf of the poor and oppressed goes on a Catholic's resume, subject to inspection at the pearly gates, just as much as adultery or any other private sin. It's tough getting social immorality placed on a par with coveting one's neighbor's spouse.

The other sad inconsistency is that this worthy encyclical comes out at the same time that the Vatican is putting on trial those American Catholics most devoted to applying those social principles: religious sisters. Once again it as if the one hand is waving the world onward and the other is halting the development of those within its ranks. Sad.

From my perspective, popes do well when speaking to the world and poorly when speaking to Catholics. Integrating the messages and themes, speaking with one voice, would have some big advantages. It would also help if popes learned to say they were sorry. Pope Paul VI once said wanly that it was "difficult being infallible." That mystique could change with an apology now and again. In the wake of the reinstatement of the Holocaust-denying bishop, for instance, Benedict could have done a "my bad." Instead, in what was described as a diplomatic shuffle, someone else got scapegoated.

All the same, good for him for reiterating the social principles (which inevitably sends the losing side scurrying to find out whether "we have to obey"). Just pass those on to the institutional church. To think that the Catholic church could implement the grand ministry of justice without making profound changes in its own structures is foolhardy. Time to get on with it.

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