

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 18, 2009 at 12:10pm

Cardinal George and the politics of liturgy

by Tom Roberts



News Analysis

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago has several times recently addressed the relationship between bishops and ordinary Catholics and how that relationship affects the manner in which we all live out a life of faith.

“Relations do not speak first of control but of love,” he said in a Nov. 16 speech as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. “If there is a loosening of relationship between ourselves and those whom Christ has given us to govern in love, it is for us to reach out and re-establish connections necessary for all to remain in communion.”

Exactly what the cardinal meant by that comment was evidently to be unpacked the next day in a secret meeting of bishops, a gathering closed to the media and to staff at the U.S. bishops’ conference.

George treated the topic in his recently released book, *The Difference God Makes: A Catholic Vision of Faith, Communion, and Culture*, and he elaborated on the matter during a recent interview with NCR’s John Allen. In that exchange, the cardinal expressed his weariness with the Catholic liberal-conservative divide, suggesting that each was similar to the other in the exaggerated attention they give to intrachurch politics and in focusing far too much on bishops, the power they have and the way in which they exercise it, and not enough on Christ.

The inference to be drawn from it all is that Catholics, liberal or conservative, are incorrect to view the relationship with bishops through the lens of control and power and that if laypeople would concentrate more on being "simply Catholic" and less on what goes on in hierarchical venues, there would be less contentiousness all around.

The sentiment deserves attention because during the bishops' gathering in Washington this month, George would be overseeing what might be the last installment of a debate that has gone on, at times bitterly, over liturgical reforms that have their origins in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

The council is fading into history as a marker of a certain generation of contemporary Catholics. However, how that council is interpreted – indeed, whether some of our bishops today are willing even to concede that anything significant occurred at the council to change the church – will continue to have an effect on Catholic life for the foreseeable future. The effects of the council are somewhat akin to the effects of the feminist or civil rights movements. Young people today do not have to worry about the same battles that their parents fought, but the benefits that both women and minorities today can take for granted are both a direct result of those earlier efforts and something to be diligently guarded.

And while the council was hardly a movement – indeed, it was far more formally structured and produced a body of documents approved by the world's bishops – what some would perceive as its benefits or gains are now far more disputed than those achieved in matters of race or the rights of women.

A reading of even a portion of the record on liturgical reform shows that the council inspired deep shifts in ecclesiology, as well as the role of bishops in relation to the way we pray. The essential nature of the changes underway was noted in 1963 by then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, today's Pope Benedict XVI.

As a peritus, or expert, at the council, he wrote: "The first chapter of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy contains a statement that represents for the Latin church a fundamental innovation. The formulation of liturgical laws for their own regions is now, within limits, the responsibility of the various conferences of bishops. And this is not by delegation from the Holy See, but by virtue of their own independent authority."

He termed the development "especially important" in "the decentralization of liturgical decision-making."

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It is clear that the Ratzinger view contained in those comments has undergone substantial change since. But what invalidates his understanding back then that "this small paragraph, which for the first time assigns to the conferences of bishops their own canonical authority, has more significance for the episcopacy and for the long desired strengthening of episcopal power than anything in the Constitution on the Church itself"?

By extension, what invalidates others' similar understanding that, in Ratzinger's earlier view, the council had, "without fanfare, and largely unnoticed by the public" produced a work fundamental in the renewal of ecclesiology? It is a conclusion far different from that expressed by some today that the council merely confirmed a continuation of what had gone before.

While George asserts that Catholics should pay less attention to bishops, it was bishops – he among them

? who have argued that those who hold the early Ratzinger view of the council as marking a fundamental change in ecclesiology are wrong and that liturgical renewal has gone off in the wrong direction.

It was bishops who, in 1997, convened a committee of 11 men who met in the Vatican to secretly overhaul the translations of the American lectionary, or the scripture readings used at Mass.

Overtaken by the committee was a translation process that had been in use since the council and that was broadly consultative and had included a number of women. Only one of the men on the new committee held a graduate degree in scripture studies; two were not native English speakers; and several had a history of objecting to inclusive-language translations, including two of the American archbishops and the lone scripture scholar. Three American bishops who had worked most closely on the lectionary and were themselves Bible scholars ? including Donald Trautman of Erie, Pa., currently the lone voice of opposition to certain translations in the missal under consideration by the bishops ? were excluded from the group. They were replaced by conservative prelates Bishop Jerome Hanus of Dubuque, Iowa; William Levada, then of San Francisco and now a cardinal and head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; Justin Rigali, then of St. Louis and now cardinal in Philadelphia; and Cardinal Francis Stafford, then head of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

In 2002, leadership of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, known as ICEL, was replaced under pressure from the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship with bishops more congenial to that congregation's view of how translation should be effected.

Chosen as executive secretary was Fr. Bruce Harbert, a former Anglican who was previously critical of the commission and who had served the previous year as a visiting faculty member at George's liturgical institute at Mundelein Seminary. At the time, Allen characterized the institute as ?in part conceived as an alternative to progressive liturgical approaches associated with some ICEL consultants.?

For lack of more precise terms, as much as the matter of translation and liturgical reform have been the battleground between conservative and liberal forces within the church for more than 40 years, George has weighed in heavily and influentially on the conservative side. He now gets to oversee deliberations that will lead to important decisions in the debate.

George may wish Catholics rise above the fray and eliminate considerations of power and control from their assessment of church life, but it might be difficult to ignore bishops when their politics and ecclesial persuasions ultimately determine the very words we use in worship.

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Source URL (retrieved on 03/19/2018 - 8:19am): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/cardinal-george-and-politics-liturgy>

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