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Is church's future tied to bishops?

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

I understand the headline: Three archbishops and the American Catholic future. I probably would have written the same. But one has to wonder, especially given the constant erosion of authority and the erosion of protections that once shielded the hierarchical layer of the church, whether the future of the church is so tightly wrapped up with bishops as it might once have been.

I am not anti-hierarchy. I think the church needs a healthy hierarchy to exist as a healthy institution. Leaders are essential.

But I also agree with the increasing voices among the clergy, even among bishops, who see reform of the clerical/hierarchical culture as essential and even inevitable.

The pallium ceremony that colleague John Allen describes is a case in point of the growing disconnect between people and leadership. It is a ceremony that highlights the connection between pope and bishops.

But where is the laity invested in this ceremony? The inference one must draw is that authority immediately and automatically comes from the office itself, even though no one under that authority has a clue as to who made the selections and why. The men involved may be perfectly qualified, but who knows? And how would we know?

What we know is that they were chosen secretly by a culture that has shown, in the most shocking ways, that its primary interest is preservation of itself.

Allen writes that Benedict XVI told the archbishops that their connection with the papacy is a "pledge of liberty," insulating them from the pressure of "local powers, national or international," and assuring their "full adherence to the truth and to the authentic tradition" of the church.

At the same time, the pope said that the greatest threat to the church comes not from exterior challenges but from whatever "pollutes the faith and Christian life" — damaging the integrity of the mystical body, weakening its capacity for prophecy and witness, and tarnishing the beauty of its face.

I'm not quite sure what Benedict meant by that, but one hopes -- given the news about the hierarchy in recent years and in recent weeks -- that it was a warning that the pollution in recent decades has been generated too often by the leaders of the community. The era of scandal has certainly shown that the church's survival is dependant on far more than bishops.

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