

Listening: A Prelude for Change or a Strategy for Appeasement?

Ken Briggs | Jun. 10, 2011 NCR Today

John Thavis writes from Rome for Catholic News Service that the new head of the Congregation for Religious is sounding as if his mission is to be a bridge over troubled waters.

Archbishop Joao Braz de Aviz has spoken in favor of "a more positive view of religious" and a mending of rifts between the Vatican and orders resulting from a number of tensions including those produced by the sweeping investigation of U.S. orders.

His prescription for success tries to balance the old ideal of nuns as "models of fidelity" with a nod to the Vatican II appeal to "pay attention to today's culture."

To do this, the archbishop has vowed to listen.

That approach, according to Thavis and others, has given some religious leaders hope that things will get better. Listening, said Sister Mary Lou Wertz, president of the International Union of Superiors General, entails "open sharing" and by inference an openness to change.

Others have responded to the archbishop's "good cop" initiatives with a great deal more skepticism. In effect, they say, a new vice president can be sent in to foster better dynamics among disgruntled workers while doing nothing to change the rules that are the underlying source of conflict.

For decades, the hierarchy has taken a page from the human potential movement, emphasizing the need to hear what others have to say. Bishops vow to hear what their priests, nuns and laity have to say. In itself, it's a good thing, of course, a whole lot preferable to shutting one's ears to the mix of opinion out there.

But listening by itself can provide information with which leaders can implement unaltered policy rather than altering the policies themselves. The hierarchy in America, for example, heard what women had to say in their effort to write a pastoral letter on women before abandoning the project on the basis of the inherent conflict between what they were hearing and the inflexibility of church law on things like the ordination of women. Now women aren't even supposed to speak of it in any kind of church setting.

For those who are content with the status quo with regard to women, Archbishop Joao's willingness to listen may strike the right note, reflecting empathy with the concerns of nuns while lacking any authority to change anything of substance.

Sympathetic, congenial personalities such as the archbishop's, or the "friendly to nuns" reputation of his American assistant can create an atmosphere in which contentious teachings become marginally more acceptable, but they risk creating the painful deception that listening equates to having any ability to bring about meaningful reform.

It's been done at the top. For decades, the world's bishops have conducted synods in Rome on important topics.

The premise is that they need to be heard in all their diversity. But in the end, the voices of renewal or reform make little difference. The pope usually ignores and discards their recommendations. Such has been the fate of much of the Vatican II call for the ordained leadership to set up advisory bodies. Good idea, rarely effective in practice.

We've heard nary a peep out of the investigation of orders, pending, presumably, a final report. What has shifted in the process in reaction to the furor it created is its packaging. The public relations focus has increasingly swung from scolding to boundless gratitude for all the nuns have done. The smaller number of conservative orders might have wished for a sharper challenge to the character of communities that have advanced renewal, but they'll live with it as "models of fidelity."

Meanwhile, the purpose of the investigation -- to root out what the Vatican considered disloyalty of many orders to its standard of "fidelity" and the indictment of many nuns as selling out their tradition to feminism and secularism -- those remain in place.

My guess is that the final report will play down these accusations while not addressing the Vatican's agenda in terms that seem offensive. They did listen to the uproar and seem likely to back off a bit. But it's also likely that the investigation has already done what it set out to do by leaving the original accusations in the air, employing a cautionary, even daunting, warning to the keepers of the renewal spirit, and keeping every word of Vatican policy just as it is.

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