

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

February 1, 2013 at 11:17am

Can't we all just get along?

by Robert McClory

NCR Today

A monsignor wrote a blog on the U.S. Catholic bishop's website recently, calling for a kind of peace or truce between the two embattled sides of the church.

One of the greater sorrows in his experience, wrote Msgr. Charles Pope from Washington state, is "the great divide that exists in the two 'wings' of the Church. In one wing are those who engage the great moral struggles of our day related to abortion, the proper biblical understanding of human sexuality, marriage and family, and questions related to euthanasia. In the other wing, those who engage the great social and moral issues related to poverty, economic justice, solidarity, unity and mutual respect."

The church needs both wings, he said, if it is to be credible and authentic: "I live for the day when those passionate in either wing will come to esteem the work of the other, grateful that some engage in caring for the poor, so others can engage in protecting the unborn, that some are engaging the life issues, so others can engage the critical needs of the poor, the imprisoned, the marginalized and those isolated by poverty, mental health, disability, and other struggles. When both wings work together, the church soars."

I was glad to see this call for a moratorium, even if it wasn't from the bishops' conference itself, just a lonely monsignor on their website. I wondered if it would ever be possible to back off several yards from our entrenched positions and at least listen to each other respectfully.

Then I thought no, it can't be done. These two wings are not moving in rhythmic symmetry but in entirely different directions. Any kind of bird with this problem would hardly be able to get off the ground. The foundations of liberal and conservative are so different. Their attitudes toward the essentials of belief differ, as does their understanding of church authority, the Mass, the papacy, the Bible, tradition, authentic moral teaching and a dozen other issues. Where's the possible common ground? Then I realized common ground is not necessarily a starting point, but maybe respect for the other side could be.

As an *NCR* blogger, many of the comments readers send in frustrate me. They are so full of a kind of cosmic certitude about their position that they feel justified in hammering their opponents with sarcasm, innuendo, insults and condemnation -- and all without any reliance on sources for their position. It's like a flock of angry birds flopping around in the backyard with feathers flying, pecking futilely at one another and never accomplishing anything.

I don't mean to make a blanket accusation here. *NCR* has dozens of readers who do comment thoughtfully and intelligently on blogs and articles, sometimes extending the point of a writer or adding another way to view the situation or even taking issue with the whole bulk of the article, but in a calm, reasoned way. And that, I think, is what good journalism is about. I would love to see more of these readers coming forth and airing their deeply held convictions. And how great it is when those who disagree respond politely, state their position and offer reasons for their views. This sort of response can lead to ongoing communication between the original participants, and it lures in others to illustrate or extend the original point. That's the sort of common-ground approach that opens minds -- even changes minds. So maybe there is something to be said for Msgr. Pope's appeal. Meanwhile, we can at least try to let respect prevail, even when we're mad as hell!

Incidentally, Msgr. Pope might consider another blog for the bishops' website, this one suggesting that the bishops themselves -- San Francisco's Salvatore Cordileone, in particular -- show more respect in their characterization of those with whom they disagree on gay marriage.

You can read Pope's whole column here.

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