

For once, remaining Catholic because of -- not in spite of -- the pope

Isabella R. Moyer | Apr. 5, 2013 NCR Today

I have spent too many adult years struggling to stay in the church despite of Father ?X? or Bishop ?Y.? In the midst of parish or diocesan dysfunction, I leaned on like-minded friends who shared my frustrations. Yes, we believed that we are the church. No one priest, bishop or pope could force us to leave the church we love. But it was hard; so hard. During the darkest days, many left.

I stayed, but often wished I wasn't so emotionally invested in my church. It is much easier to quietly fulfill your Sunday Mass obligation, sign a check for the annual diocesan appeal and watch highlights of the latest papal visit on TV without worrying about the shenanigans going on behind the scenes.

These early, euphoric days of Pope Francis are a surprisingly new experience for me. I may become a woman who proudly affirms her Catholicism ?because of? her pope, not ?despite of? him. These are good days for those who yearn for a church that models and inspires a faith of the heart, simple service and humility, a love for the poor, a call to more prayerful silence and fewer words.

But, these are not good days for all. Rumbblings are sounding from those who have a different view of church than I do. Where I saw excessive opulence, they saw liturgical beauty and respect. Where I saw blind obedience, they saw faithful submission to authority. Where I saw clericalism, they saw a respect for ontological exclusivity.

Mere weeks ago, my more traditional-minded sisters and brothers looked to the pope for inspiration and affirmation of their preferred style of Catholicism. Today, it is my turn.

There is no sense of triumphalism, just sadness that we cannot rejoice together. To be fair, I did not rejoice at the election of Benedict XVI. I understand, too well, the heart-sinking feeling of being given a pastor, bishop or pope who you believe does not embrace the same vision of church as you do.

And yet, we are truly a universal church with room enough to accommodate many visions and diverse worship styles. It does not need to be ?either/or.? It can be ?both/and? without forcing one?s preference on others.

In the coming days, focus will be on how our new pope will tackle the much needed curial reform. In this work, all we can do is offer a hopeful prayer and watch events unfold.

Another question remains, and it is a question that we do have an active role in addressing: How are we going to heal the divide within the church herself?

Will each new papacy from now on be greeted like a World Cup win? Our team won, it?s time to pour into the streets and wave the banners! Or, our team lost, and now we must accept the gloating of the winners and hope for victory next time.

It?s tempting to say to our traditionalist friends, ?Well, now you know how we felt for the last papacy or two.?

But, this is childish triumphalism. It's also mean-spirited and does nothing to heal the gaping divides in our church.

We should all embrace this moment to reach out across the divide, to reach out a hand in dialogue. Every act of simple compassion and inclusive charity that Francis exhibits should be an inspiration for us to do the same.

The spirit of our new pope affirms my reasons for staying in the church. Hopefully, many will stay and many more will return because of Francis. For those who are not enamored of his style, I hope that they stay despite of him.

I know it's not easy to do, but it can be done. I've had to do it myself.

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