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Two priests, two popes, half a century apart

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

Austrian Fr. Helmut Schüller's current "Catholic Tipping Point" tour, on which he is calling Catholicism's leaders and people back to the documents and spirit of renewal of the Second Vatican Council, follows by half a century Swiss theologian Fr. Hans Küng's tour of America, speaking on what was then seemed a revolutionary idea: "The Church and Freedom."

Anyone who was in the crowd that packed Chicago's McCormack Place to hear Küng, whose book on the church and reform ignited the imagination of Catholics as it revealed the possibilities of the council then in session, will recall the electrical charge that exploded like a flash bulb in the crowd's response to his presentation. Prominent layman Dan Herr introduced him and said later that the wave of enthusiasm that swept up from the crowd convinced him the church was really ready for change.

Küng received at least half of the back of the ecclesiastical hand that has slapped Schüller for his prophet's call to reinvigorate the church by returning to the work of the council in which Küng played such an important role. Küng received an interdict from The Catholic University of America but an honorary degree from St. Louis University. One of John Paul II's first actions was to decree that Küng could no longer be regarded as a Catholic theologian at the University of Tübingen where, even stripped of that credential, he continues to be a leader in church reform and renewal.

Schüller has been denied permission to speak in Catholic churches or schools by bishops who, much as in Küng's day, do not want to fail to ban a speaker or silence a theologian if that looks like the pope's wishes. Schüller enters the New Inquisition Sweepstakes not riding a sleek thoroughbred bearing theological colors but on the clerical Budweiser workhorse of hierarchical indenture. He has worked as a church official and knows its stable of swayback horses desperately needs to be cleaned out or burned down so the church can enter fully into the only race that counts: the human race.

You won't find irony as rich as that associated with the punishment he received from the Austrian hierarchy. They told him he was no longer a monsignor, a title out of medieval court life, the loss of which turns out to be a tribute to Schüller, who is committed to bringing the church as a servant to humanity in the 21st century. Schüller is traveling on the energy generated by Küng and the reformers of Vatican II, urging people and bishops to commit themselves to the evangelization urged by that council rather than a return to the Middle Ages and monsignors that's urged as a new "interpretation" of Vatican II by those partners in retro-theology and church discipline, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

If Schüller and Küng, following the same knight's calling to retrieve the Holy Grail, might have been separated at birth, so, too, the popes John XXIII and Francis, separated by the same half century, possess the same master pastoral gene. John XXIII expressed it by bringing his country roots with him to the Vatican, breaking centuries of traditions (such as the pope's eating alone) and, when told the workers would not come near him when he walked in the papal gardens, asked, "Why not? I won't harm them." He disdained the official papal footwear and had a pair of familiar farmer's boots modified for his many ambles around the Vatican and occasionally into Rome itself. He laughed when he was told that the English journalists called him "Johnny Walker."

Pope Francis seems to many nervous Catholics too good to be true, and they worry that this man, in his large-hearted simplicity and common sense, may somehow turn out to be different than he has seemed: less like John in the long run and more like Benedict. Any pope who can say having the previous pope around is like having grandpa nearby does not seem likely to lose the humanity that makes him so attractive.

When John XXIII was pope and broke down barriers by the kind of embrace he gave the delegation of Jewish officials, saying, "I am Joseph and you are my brothers," philosopher Hannah Arendt, who noted his work to save Jews during the war, wrote: "We have a Christian sitting on the throne of Peter."

She would write the same thing if she heard of Pope Francis's pastoral response when, on his plane returning from World Youth Day in Rio, he was asked about homosexuals and he talked, obviously from his heart, of their human goodness, of our need to support rather than censure them, and who was he to judge them if they sought God in their own way?

The wonderful thing about these words about homosexuals is that nobody -- no speech writer, adviser or P.R. expert, much less a curial official -- could have imagined the saving simplicity of Francis' profoundly Christian words. He speaks as John XXIII did when asked why he called Vatican II into session. He did not respond by saying that the church had to tighten up but that it had to open up, and his purpose was not to save monsignors or other trappings of the past. He did it for the people "so that the human sojourn on earth might be less sad." That, of course, is why Francis urges bishops and priests to get out of the institution and into the midst of their people. The church is indeed to make the journey of all people less sad.

So blessed are we that we have in Schüller a priest who calls us back to Vatican II much as Küng had called us to it half a century ago. Francis stands as un-self-consciously as a pastoral pope as John XXIII

did in that same era. Schüller is not just calling for healthy reforms; he is bringing back, as is Pope Francis, the excitement that filled the church at the time of Vatican II. While Benedict XVI worked hard to bring us back to the 19th century of the First Vatican Council, Francis is gently bidding us to rediscover the riches of Vatican II so we may serve the world better; so that, in fact, we may join in making the "human sojourn on earth less sad."

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