

A Charade of Unity

The US bishops continue to ignore Pope Francis' vision for a renewed Church

By Robert Mickens | Vatican City

The pontificate of Pope Francis has now surpassed that of Benedict XVI in terms of duration. And Benedict has now been a "former" pope longer than he was actually the Roman Pontiff.

The latest milestone comes during the eight-day Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the "octave" when Christians ask God to guide them in healing the divisions that keep their various separated Churches and communities from realising full communion.

It is part of the ecumenical movement, which is aimed at fostering deeper relations between the different Christian denominations. Its eventual goal is the restoration of the full, visible unity of all who believe in Jesus Christ and strive to truly be his disciples.

But the work of ecumenism is severely hampered by divisions within the various denominations themselves. Sadly, every Christian Church and ecclesial community has them.

The fractures within the worldwide Orthodox Church are well-known.

The Anglican Communion, which is both praised and ridiculed for tolerating vastly different doctrinal positions among its members, has also incurred splits.

And the Roman Catholic Church has not been immune to division, either.

But until fairly recently its leaders, the bishops, have been amazingly united in an almost lockstep fashion.

Singing from the same hymn sheet, until they didn't...

There are more than 5,000 bishops around the world. And despite different cultures and languages, they have been strikingly harmonious in singing from the same hymn sheet.

After John Paul II imposed a strict litmus test on what type of candidates could be appointed to the episcopate, they have been especially mindful of following the lead set by the Bishop of Rome.

They did so, with few exceptions, during the Polish pope's long reign and also during the nearly eight years his Bavarian successor was at the helm.

But that changed not long after the Argentine Jesuit, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, was elected to the See of Peter in March 2013.

Looking back at the past nearly eight years, one can see that the worldwide episcopate's honeymoon with Pope Francis was brief. That is certainly true with the bishops of the United States.

And it was never more obvious than January 20 when the pope and the president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) issued two, starkly different messages to the newly inaugurated US President Joe Biden.

An iron fist in a velvet glove

The upshot of the message from Francis was hope and encouragement.

The longer note from the USCCB leader, Archbishop José Horacio Gómez, was more like an iron fist in a velvet glove. It was congratulatory, but with an ominous warning.

Right from day one of the new administration, the bishops put Biden on notice.

The archbishop's message was also the latest proof that the bishops, as a body, still have no intention of adopting the new pastoral priorities that Francis has proposed.

And they continue to show little interest in responding to his call for a change of mentality -- one that's more open and inviting, less restrictive and legalistic and less confrontational.

Obviously, not all the American Church leaders are contrary to the pope.

And one of them -- Cardinal Blasé Cupich of Chicago -- finally spoke out publicly against the USCCB-led passive resistance to Francis. He called Gómez's message "ill-considered" and promised to force the conference to discuss what is really behind it.

Cupich was supported by some others, like Bishop Robert McElroy in San Diego, who also voiced displeasure with the conference president.

But most of them made no peep at all, while a good number actually defended Archbishop Gómez.

Time to stop the charade

Pope Francis has a problem with the bishops of the United States. There is no question about that.

They have been slow as a conference, and many of them as individuals, to demonstrate any real enthusiasm for the Jesuit pope or the vision of renewal he's put before the Church.

The USCCB has stubbornly clung to the "culture war" battle plan their conference began mapping out well over a decade ago.

But let's be clear. Bishops are not branch managers for the pope, so they don't have to be just yes-men. And Francis, as much as anyone, would defend a bishop's right to disagree with him on certain issues.

However, under the current system, no matter how questionable the theology and ecclesiology that undergird it, bishops are (almost all of them) directly appointed by the pope.

And the pope can remove them. There's fat chance that he would, though. He's is too exceedingly tolerant.

Instead, more bishops should join with Cardinal Cupich and stop the charade that their conference is a united body. It is not. And pretending that it is only emboldens the cultural warriors that continue to control the USCCB's direction.

Benedict's bishops still in control

The ideological bishops that Benedict XVI appointed to the United States still hold some of the most important posts in the country. They make up 17 of the 32 Latin Rite metropolitan archbishops.

Three other archbishops still in office were appointed by John Paul II.

Those that Francis has named amount to only twelve -- twelve out of thirty-two. Three of them are cardinals. Besides Cupich, there is Joseph Tobin in Newark and Wilton Gregory in Washington.

But so far, they have not been able to significantly change the direction of the USCCB or the ethos or image of the Church in the United States at the institutional level.

The national episcopal conference took a more concerted turn toward waging culture wars in 2011 when Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who was appointed archbishop of New York in 2009, basically orchestrated a coup and got himself elected USCCB president.

It was a nasty and deliberate break with the longstanding custom that the conference vice-president is always elected president. In fact, because of this, the most important vote was always for the V.P.

Francis has been pope less than eight years, but none of the bishops he's named has ever been elected to the top leadership posts in the USCCB.

Instead, Dolan, who will be 71 in February, continues to throw his considerable weight around and use his overbearing personality to move levers inside the USCCB and in other Catholic institutions in the country for that matter.

It is not clear what Francis can do to shift the balance in the US hierarchy so that the leaders of the Church in America begin to look more like the type of bishops he has modeled. It will take a long time if the pope just replaces men as they reach retirement age.

Perhaps, he ought to consider moving or removing some of those who have been obstructionists, especially those who have worked actively with a certain former papal nuncio to Washington to discredit him!

Unfortunately, there are more than a few.

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