

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

Number 77, October 15, 2012

DEMOCRACY

Duck! Here comes another negative political ad! 'Tis the season for mudslinging, distorted truth, permissible slander, perception management, and sculptured sound bites. Isn't democracy fun?

If the attack ads are so effective, why don't we see more of them all year long? You know, the Geico gecko karate-kicking the Progressive Insurance lady in the head. A Buick morphing into a transformer and smashing a Toyota. Miller Lite accusing Bud Lite that their secret ingredient is arsenic. More and more fun!

It's the price we pay for democracy. In politics, candidates raise millions of dollars which they eagerly hand off to marketing firms so that the firms can create the message the politicians (and super-pacs) want. The firms then eagerly hand off the remaining funds to media outlets who always are the winners because they ultimately get most of the money, regardless of who wins the elections. Nice system, especially if you work as a media outlet.

In the midst of this delicious, democratic frivolity and waste stand a number of companies and institutions that function undemocratically. The military and the Catholic Church come to mind immediately. The military needs a strong hierarchical structure because their mission is to defend the country, a task that demands organization, chain of command, and disciplined participants.

But why does the Catholic Church need a military-style structure to accomplish its mission of being Christ in our world? Especially in a society so imbued with democracy that it even tolerates the excesses of a political season? Especially when Jesus vehemently condemned this kind of authoritarian system?

Jesus was certainly no politician and he lived in a decidedly undemocratic society. So, can his teaching and his experience be transported into our messy democratic society?

I sure hope so. If not, the gospel is reduced to a guidebook for individuals on their personal spiritual journeys. Our faith in Jesus demands some focus on community, which includes our society and how we govern ourselves.

Can democratic principles co-exist with the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church? Not easily. But there are at least two helpful, democratic principles included in official Church teaching: collegiality and subsidiarity.

Collegiality includes some aspects of shared decision making. (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church, Chapter 3, Paragraph 22, etc)

Subsidiarity teaches that a “community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order...” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraph 1883)

Admittedly, these teachings are surrounded, almost engulfed, by elaborate and repeated teachings about the primacy of the pope and the steadfast hierarchical structure of the Church. But these official teachings on collegiality and subsidiarity do exist.

So, the main problem is not the teaching itself; the problem is choice. There is a choice on how these teachings will be implemented or ignored. Choice means it is a free will decision by Church leaders, including the Pope.

Here are two recent examples of how collegiality and subsidiarity are deliberately being ignored:

- Collegiality: the outright hijacking of the English translation of the Missal by Vaticanistas disavowed the English speaking Bishops of their right to make these decisions. On the other hand, these Bishops did not insist strenuously enough on their rights.
- Subsidiarity: the Vatican process for the selection of Bishops ignores and rejects any input from the clergy and people of the diocese in need of a bishop.

Without changing any of our official teaching, we could have a significantly different, current Catholic Church experience. By taking collegiality and subsidiarity seriously and creating ways to apply these principles wisely, we could have vibrant parish communities all over the world, dioceses that identify, nurture and celebrate the varied gifts of all the People of God, national conferences that honestly deal with major issues, and a Vatican that inspires, leads, and orchestrates these gifts of the Spirit.

It could be a bottoms-up, hierarchical Church rather than a top-down Church as it is now. With collegiality and subsidiarity as the guiding principles, we could turn everything around and still retain our current teaching.

But our Church leaders choose to enforce the top down approach. It is a choice, not a teaching. In response, Hans Küng is calling for a bottoms-up revolution. (<http://ncronline.org/blogs/hans-kung-calls-open-church-revolt>)

When that time comes, can attack ads be far behind? Any sympathetic marketing firms and super-pacs out there?