

Shared vision: Catholicity across the theological spectrum

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Talk about unity amid diversity in the church can seem hollow, especially as people confront deeply controversial issues. The gossip in the halls of denominational assemblies recently has been about possible schisms over the issue of homosexuality. Fragmentation, not unity, seems the experience of our times.

Occasionally, however, one recognizes clearly the unity undergirding different ways of living the Christian life, the genuine “catholicity” that embraces different parties and opinions. This happened at a recent pastors’ conference that comprised some self-avowedly “liberal” and some unflinchingly “conservative” pastors. The pastors differed mightily in their politics, heroes, jokes and hopes for the church’s future. Yet one could perceive a unity among them, one shaped in this case by the very form of their life as ministers of the gospel.

The pastors had a lot in common: All of them struggle to preach from the same texts. All know what it is like to preach to the same people year after year. They preside over the sacraments and celebrate the mystery at the heart of things even when discouraged. They visit the lonely parishioners whose kids don’t call or who see no one but a nurse or mail carrier most days. They know about how ministry provokes antagonism, praise and indifference in seemingly equal measure. They all try to speak a faithful word of correction to an unjust world. They are all concerned about not neglecting their families. They seek to maintain their own prayer life while being paid to pray on behalf of the whole church. They work to keep alive the vision of the beauty of Christ which first drew them into ministry.

It was clear that, for all the differences, the group was united not simply by their profession but by the presence of Jesus, who has graced them with a life of serving. The catholicity across the theological spectrum is the catholicity of following the same Lord and continuing his ministry of teaching, healing, forgiving, naming sin, breaking bread, and proclaiming Jesus’ suffering, dying and rising.

The pastors' form of life is only a particular instance of the form of life to which all baptized Christians are called. All are called to continue Jesus' ministry and to be his body in the world. May congregations and denominations reflect this deeper unity in renewed collegial bonds and redoubled efforts at reconciliation.