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Church conflict: from contention to collaboration

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stereotypes within Christianity and their biblical roots because, unfortunately, it perpetuates such stereotypes itself.

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Church Conflict: From Contention to Collaboration

Norma C. Everist
Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004
157 pages, \$18 Paperback

I like this book. It's a slender but concentrated volume, and is surely the product of academic, pastoral and personal experience, thorough research, and ecclesial engagement.

It is timely, accessible to most readers, and gives up no easy answers. While it may be read for individual edification, its true value is indicated by its structure. At every step the reader is drawn into a "panel" of representative views about conflict in the church. As I read on, I found myself being drawn into my own review of past conflicts, intrapersonal and interpersonal, and not liking what I felt. If this is a deliberate strategy, then Everist has succeeded, at least with this reviewer, in exposing the slippery and seductive nature of conflict. Self-awareness seems to be a painful but fundamental component if one is to discover anything redemptive about church wars.

With this awareness of my unwillingness or inability to become emotionally detached from the conversation, I was led into an introductory presentation of the scope and complexity of conflict, particularly as it applies to ecclesial bodies.

Part I utilises recognised research to inform the reader of the nature of conflict. Questions emerge: What images prevail? Is conflict like a war that must be won at all costs? What type of conflict is on stage? Is it primarily inside me, outside me, or both? Is it possible for conflict to be constructive? How does my personal resume of conflict aid or distort the issues at hand? And what role, as a church-leader, am I bound to assume? Everist proposes a climate of trust in which such elusive questions can be addressed.

Part II presents a variety of familiar responses to conflict: avoidance, confrontation, competition, control, accommodation, compromise and collaboration. Each category is analysed for strengths and weaknesses. While collaboration (co-labouring, working together) is given preference over the other responses, it is clear that any response can be used to manipulate both means and ends, or, alternatively, to be the best response in a specific instance.

The true value of this work is its utility for communal dialogue. The contents seek to be experienced in the voices and faces of other people. This book can be a reliable guide to collegial conversation and a genuine encounter with live issues in a congregation. Therefore I strongly recommend its use in the following venues or opportunities:

- A parish council retreat. If there is evidence of substantial conflict, the event should be led by an outside facilitator.
- A parish mutual ministry committee. Again, a retreat setting might be most helpful.
- The seminary classroom. Here it could serve as a resource tool for a seminar on parish administration.
- In ecclesial governance. This book could assist in the training of a cadre of personnel available for advisory committees or conflict intervention.

One more issue must be addressed. Throughout the book Everist has sprinkled Biblical and theological affirmations that undergird her approach. While brief, they are helpful and necessary. This raised a sobering question or two. Why do we, in a church that affirms and celebrates the doctrine of grace, find it so necessary to be right? Is being right or winning at all costs consistent with the gospel of our Lord or does it signal the pervasive presence of the legalisation of the gospel in which we must continue to justify ourselves before God (as if that were possible)? A congregation where everyone needs to be “right” suggests a frightening scenario. What does it profit one to be “dead” right?

But Everist has caught the spirit of the Word: We are granted an astonishing freedom – a freedom to fail, to live with unresolved issues, and to serve our neighbour’s need. The relationship of trust created by the gospel of our Lord can and does inform all that we say and do, even when we squabble.

But recent church conflicts have exposed suspect theology and dubious ethics. So I would have appreciated from Everist an extended

treatment on theology and ethics, indicating how bad theology can become the unholy ally of church strife. An excursus or appendix could have accommodated such a statement.

Notwithstanding this mild criticism I heartily recommend this book for wide use and much benefit.

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Interpreting Christian Art: Reflections on Christian Art

Edited by Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons.

Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004.

256 pages, \$48 Hardcover

Interpreting Christian Art is a collection of essays originally presented as part of the Pruitt Symposium on “Interpreting Christian Art,” held at Baylor University in Waco, Texas in October 2000. The symposium brought together researchers, clergy, and laity interested in the question of how religious art can contribute to the life of the contemporary Christian church. The resulting essays provide an interdisciplinary exploration of Christian art, with contributions from art historians, theologians, and biblical scholars. Essayists include Margaret Miles, Robin M. Jensen, Graydon F. Snyder, Charles Barber, Anthony Cutler, William M. Jensen, Paolo Berdini, John W. Cook, and the editors, Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons.

The essays vary in length and complexity. A number would be of interest primarily to art historians or students of art. They present close analyses of specific examples of art works from particular historical periods, with a focus on the early Christian, Byzantine, Renaissance, and Baroque eras, or trace the development of certain artistic themes over time.

The framing essays, by Margaret Miles (“Achieving the Christian Body: Visual Incentives to Imitation of Christ in the Christian West”) and John Cook (“What is Christian About Christian Art?”), offer the most useful insights into the contemporary relevance of the visual arts from theological and pastoral perspectives. Miles raises questions which are particularly important in the face of our modern