

Archbishop Niederauer on cathedral ministries; Allen on church communication; Update on La Sapienza spat

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 18, 2008 All Things Catholic

I was in Saint Augustine, Fla., this week, speaking at a national "Cathedral Ministry Conference." For American Catholics, Saint Augustine is, in a sense, where it all began; it was here on Sept. 8, 1565, that a Spanish missionary priest celebrated the first Mass in what would eventually become the United States.

A rustic altar in a small park billed as "America's most sacred acre," located across a footbridge from Prince of Peace Catholic Church, marks the site where Fr. Francisco Lopez de Mendoza Grajales said that Mass some 442 years ago. Today an 11-foot bronze statue of Lopez looks out over the harbor, arms outstretched.

On a drizzly Wednesday morning, I stood in that hallowed place and tried to hear echoes of the Catholic past. Among other things, it's a reminder that the first stirrings of Catholicism in this country were part of historical forces that shaped what we call today Hispanic culture. Given the rising demographic profile of Hispanics in the American church -- according to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 39 percent of the Catholic population in the U.S. is now Hispanic -- this aspect of our past is clearly also prologue.

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Archbishop George Niederauer of San Francisco keynoted the conference on Wednesday, which brings together rectors, pastors, and other leaders from cathedrals around the country. He based his reflections on his episcopal motto, drawn from the words of Jesus in Mark 10: "To serve and to give."

Niederauer joked that he had managed to go 13 years as a bishop without ever basing a talk on his motto -- he was proud, he said, "of that kind of humility." Yet he always knew the day would come when a group asked him to speak on their area of expertise, and he would fall back on the motto in the absence of any other way to get into the subject.

"You are that group, and this is that talk," he deadpanned.

Niederauer argued that cathedrals should be models of "servant leadership," rooted in service and humility rather than self-aggrandizement and power. He said the qualities of a good cathedral are the same as those of a good bishop, which he listed as "courage, fidelity, strength, zeal, pastoral outreach, accessibility, defending the rights and welfare of all the faithful, humility, patience in the face of adversity, and concern for the entire community of God's children."

The "counter-signs" of an effective bishop or cathedral, on the other hand, according to Niederauer, include becoming "isolated, arrogant, inaccessible, all take and no give, feared and dreaded rather than loved and respected."

An aspect of servant leadership growing in importance today, Niederauer said, is active concern for the entire community in which one serves, rather than just the Catholic population.

“We have travelled a long distance,” he joked, “from the vision of that 1950s Catholic newspaper in the Midwest that once carried the following headline: ‘No Catholics killed in Oklahoma storms.’”

In terms of translating servant leadership into practice, Niederauer urged cathedrals to exercise imagination. One of his most poignant asides came in discussing how cathedrals might engage the immigration issue.

Anti-immigrant prejudice, he said, “is not just a failure in charity, but a failure in imagination.”

“When I hear anti-immigrant people speak, I often wonder what it would be like to get them into a room with their parents and grandparents who came to this country, and to have a conversation,” Niederauer said. “That’s about imagination -- moving them to understand what it was like for their ancestors to be defenseless, helpless, feeling lost in a place where they don’t speak the language.”

Niederauer holds a doctorate in English literature from the University of Southern California, and he closed off this line of reflection with a bit of literary flourish from poet E.E. Cummings: “And down they forgot, as up they grew.”

“I think we’ve down forgot, as up we grew,” Niederauer said, referring to the present ambivalence about immigration in the United States.

Niederauer was asked how a cathedral can engage issues of community concern without getting pulled into partisan political disputes. He said he had no magic formula, but advised working with ecumenical and inter-faith partners because “there’s strength in numbers.”

Most importantly, he said, cathedrals should not avoid difficult or high-profile challenges for fear of being used.

“We have to take risks,” he said, counseling against an approach of “we don’t want our skirts to get dirty, so we won’t go outside.”

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In addition to my usual presentation on “Catholic Megatrends,” I was asked to speak on “Cathedrals and the Media.” I tried to make a few broad points about telling the story of the church in today’s media environment; portions of what I had to say follow.

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In preparation for our session, I performed a small bit of media analysis. Using the Lexis-Nexis database, which indexes virtually all major print and broadcast media outlets in the English language, I ran a search under the keywords “cathedral” and “Catholic” for the week of January 3-10, 2007. The results offer us an (admittedly unscientific) sense of how cathedrals are currently covered.

Here are the first eight stories that popped up:

1. President Kibaki of Kenya visits Sacred Heart Cathedral in Eldoret, in the North Rift region hardest hit by ethnic violence;

2. A 29-story shopping center and office complex opens next to the Cathedral of St. Chad in Birmingham, England, the first Catholic cathedral built in England after the Reformation (dedicated 1840), threatening to blot the cathedral from the skyline;
3. Protestors gather outside St. Joseph's Cathedral in Hanoi, Vietnam, to demand the return of property and land confiscated from the Catholic church by the Communist government;
4. Sacred Heart Cathedral in Raleigh, North Carolina, offers Mass in the Tridentine rite on Jan. 6, for the first time since the Second Vatican Council;
5. Several properties surrounding the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Richmond, Virginia, are sold to Virginia Commonwealth University for \$4.04 million;
6. St. Mary's Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption in Covington, Kentucky, is profiled for a "Weekend Destinations" piece in the Cincinnati Enquirer;
7. A "Mass for Racial Harmony" is to be held in conjunction with the Martin Luther King remembrance at the Cathedral of St. Francis Assisi in Metuchen, New Jersey;
8. A session for lapsed Catholics is held at the Co-Cathedral of St. Theresa in Honolulu, facilitated by what are described as "former lapsed Catholics." (I resisted the temptation to fire off a note to this pastor suggesting that there's a third category which might be even more in need of outreach -- "intermittently lapsed" Catholics.)

What can we learn? To begin with, several positives: 1) In moments of crisis in various parts of the world, cathedrals remain a place people instinctively turn to for solace, and to carve out spaces of dialogue; 2) Even highly secularized cultures somehow see the artistic and architectural patrimony of cathedrals as worth preserving, and therefore worry when it's overshadowed by gaudy commercial development; 3) Creative pastoral efforts by cathedrals, such as the Mass for Racial Harmony in Metuchen or the session for lapsed Catholics in Honolulu, can capture the imagination.

Nevertheless, these observations risk what in my business we call "burying the lead," meaning downplaying the most obvious and important point. Recall that Jan. 3-10, the period of time under examination here, fell during one of the most crucial liturgical and spiritual points of the year: just after Christmas and New Year's, with the Feast of the Epiphany smack dab in the middle. Yet not one of these stories (or the 20 or so other pieces that I didn't list) made any reference to that activity. There was nothing about how a local homilist had framed the meaning of Epiphany; nothing about the spiritual significance of the Incarnation for contemporary Christians; nothing about the prayer intentions local Catholics brought to the liturgy for the New Year; nothing about how Catholic schools or CCD programs had prepared young people for the spiritual dimension of the holidays. Nothing, in short, about the routine pastoral and spiritual life of the church as it's reflected in our cathedrals and other local faith communities.

I'd like to conduct a brief poll to drive this point home. Let me see a show of hands:

- There's a city council meeting in your town on Wednesday. How many of you would expect to see something about it in the paper on Thursday?
- If there's a high school football game Friday night, how many would expect to find at least the score, and maybe a brief write-up, in the sports section on Saturday?
- After going to church on Sunday, how many of you would turn to the newspaper on Monday for coverage of what happened in local places of worship over the weekend?

[Note: Virtually everyone raised their hands in response to the first two questions, while no one did so for the third.]

All this prompts a basic observation, which seems obvious but is worth spelling out: For the most part, routine religious activity does not count as "news" for the secular press. Unlike politics, finance and sports, religion is news only when something out of the ordinary, controversial, or exotic happens, which means that mainstream media coverage of religion is episodic and random. Even when it's well-informed and balanced -- which, to be fair to the American press, it often is -- coverage rarely penetrates to the heart of religious experience. Reporting on religion in the mainstream press is often like trying to display a three-dimensional object in a two-dimensional space -- only bits and pieces come into view, often producing a badly distorted impression of what the real object actually looks like. ?

I'll offer three suggestions for how those of you involved in cathedral ministry might tell your story in the media culture I've described.

(1) Exploit the Papal Visit/>

In the first half of 2008, the big Catholic story in the American media market will be the pope's visit April 15-20. Aside from high-profile visits to President Bush and to Ground Zero, Benedict XVI will also address the United Nations, give major speeches for leaders of Catholic education and for the American bishops, meet ecumenical and inter-religious leaders, and take part in a youth rally on the grounds of St. Joseph's Seminary in Dunwoodie, New York. During the period he's in the country, Benedict XVI will also mark his 81st birthday, on April 16, and the third anniversary of his election as pope on April 19. Both nationally and locally, there will be enormous interest -- and unlike many other media sensations, you have the luxury of seeing this one coming.

There's a natural opportunity for cathedrals to "feed the beast" with local angles, such as:

- Profiles on people from your cathedral community who may be traveling to see the pope;
- Organizing a session with local Catholic college or university people participating in the pope's meeting with educators;
- Putting together a public inter-religious or ecumenical event, ahead of the pope's meetings with leaders of other Christian churches and other faiths;
- An event after the trip with local experts on international affairs to analyze the pope's message to the United Nations, which would also be an occasion for your social ministry people to explain how your cathedral community translates the church's social teaching into action on the local level;
- Before the trip, inviting reporters to hang around after Mass one Sunday for thoughts from parishioners about what the trip means, what they're hoping the pope might say, etc.
- Bringing together a "focus group" of Catholics of various backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, and outlooks a kind of "state of the church" conversation, inviting the media and the general public to listen in. While under ordinary circumstances that might not generate much interest, you've got a window this spring in which it almost certainly will.
- The presence of Benedict XVI presents a natural "teaching moment," unlikely to occur again anytime soon, and it would be a shame not to take full advantage.

(2) Make the Cathedral a Center for Insight on All Things Catholic

Beyond the immediate resonance of the pope's visit, I encourage you to take an expansive view of your communications agenda. I want to challenge you to take responsibility not just for narrating aspects of the pastoral life of your cathedral, but also for explaining broader trends and developments in the universal church to your local public.

There is sometimes a deep cultural gap between the vocabulary and thought-world of the universal Catholic

church and Main Street USA, a situation which is forever pregnant with potential for misunderstanding. For the reasons I sketched above, you cannot rely upon the media to do the necessary work of translation, and neither is it sufficient to delegate this responsibility to a small caste of professional church communications "experts." A higher degree of Catholic literacy will not take hold in American culture until every Catholic, and especially those of you who play leadership roles in our premier parish communities, come to think of yourselves as church communicators on the local level and in your own ambits of experience.

I'm appealing not merely to your altruism, but directly to your self-interest. Impressions about the global church, the pope and the bishops often shape the prism through which people see what's happening in your cathedral, which means these impressions are your concern too.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that those of you in cathedral ministry become self-appointed spokespersons for the Vatican, or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. However, given that cathedrals are often located in urban settings with ready access to the media, as well as institutions of higher education, leaders in other faith communities, and other shapers of culture, you are uniquely positioned to unpack events in the church, dispel rumors, provide context, and otherwise offer a basic course in "Catholicism 101" for the broader public, especially in those rare moments when the church has the world's attention.

To take just one example, there's broad public interest in Islam; the *New York Times Book Review* devoted an entire issue a couple of weeks ago to recent titles on Islam. Cathedral staff might think about organizing an evening when the rector (or, better yet, the bishop) and a local imam sit down to discuss where things stand between the two faiths. Among other things, this would be an opportunity to explain what Benedict XVI was trying to say in his Regensburg address in September 2006, to comment on the legitimate issues of reciprocity and religious freedom that still have to be addressed, and to lay out what the future might hold -- including plans for a meeting later in 2008 between the pope and signatories to a letter from 138 Muslim leaders inviting Christians into dialogue, the first time that a cross-section of Muslim leaders has reflected publicly on the theological common ground between Christians and Muslims.

Similar events could be organized around other topics where the church intersects with important issues of the day, from bioethics to the 2008 elections. Over time, you could train journalists, academics, and the general public to regard the cathedral as the place to go for insight whenever questions about the Catholic church crop up.

(3) Communications Ministry

To some extent, both these suggestions involve piggy-backing upon global or national events, bringing in the life of your local cathedral, so to speak, through the back door. The more enduring challenge you face, however, is to communicate the daily life of your local faith community without depending upon external news angles.

I don't have a one-size-fits-all solution, but I do have a premise: The problem is not that routine pastoral life lacks drama, and therefore you constantly have to be seeking artificial ways to dress it up. Rather, what happens in cathedrals -- in liturgical celebrations, faith formation programs, schools and clinics and soup kitchens -- is always fascinating to those who know it from the inside, because otherwise they wouldn't bother. The trick is figuring out how to communicate that appeal to the outside world.

I'd like to close today by encouraging the continuing emergence of "Communications Ministry" as part of the "basic package" in Catholic pastoral life, sort of like CNN and TNT come with basic cable. I know many of you are already well underway, and I want to urge you to build upon what's been done and to go deeper. I believe cathedrals in particular, since you are the showcase parishes in our dioceses, should consider communications an essential component of pastoral activity, on a par in terms of emphasis and resources with youth ministry, liturgical ministry, and so on.

I am not necessarily proposing the creation of new committees or hiring new personnel, though in some cases that might be appropriate. What I am proposing is that communications ought to be at the heart of every pastoral and administrative discussion. The trick is to make this Copernican shift: from first deciding what to do, and only then how to communicate it; to making communications part of the thought process about what to do in the first place. The extent to which 'x' can be used as an occasion to promote better understanding of the church, both in its local and universal dimensions, ought to be part of the conversation about whether to do 'x' in the first place -- and equally importantly, perhaps, *how* to do it. Every time you organize a liturgy, launch a faith formation program, or serve people in need, the question of how to communicate something of that activity to the outside world ought to be part of your reflection. By the 'outside world,' I don't just mean the press, but all the sectors of civil society present in your local community -- academics, social activists, leaders of other faith communities, and so on.

To repeat, the problem is not a lack of material to communicate. Every RCIA director in this country has stories to tell of that remarkable convert whose life is the stuff of a Hollywood screenplay; our social action directors know families whose lives were rescued by a timely intervention of the church; our principals and teachers can point to kids whose lives were headed in the wrong direction, but who were instead given the chance to flourish in our schools; our confessors and counselors understand more deeply than most what's churning today in human hearts. Incredible drama unfolds in cathedrals every day; indeed, it would be stunning if this were not the case. Religion is where people bring their deepest fears, their highest hopes, their most intense passions -- it's the Coliseum of the conscience, the arena in which the universal human struggle between sin and redemption, between disgrace and new grace, plays itself out.

You don't have to manufacture news, in other words, you simply have to be imaginative about communicating the stories we already have before our eyes. The crucial step is becoming intentional about it, hence the urgency of putting 'Communications Ministry' on the ecclesiastical map.

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The big Vatican story this week was the pope's withdrawal from a scheduled appearance on Thursday at Rome's La Sapienza University, a public institution, following protests from the physics faculty and some student groups over his alleged hostility to modern science. (The 1990 comments from then-Cardinal Ratzinger on the Galileo case cited by the protestors can be found here: [Ratzinger's 1990 remarks on Galileo](#) [1].

The Vatican rarely cancels a papal event once it's been made public, so obviously they took threats of disruption seriously.

An avalanche of commentary followed. No less a figure than Giorgio Napolitano, the President of Italy (and a member of the country's center-left political forces), weighed in: 'I consider unacceptable these exhibitions of intolerance and pre-announced offensives, which created a climate incompatible with a free and serene exchange,' he said.

On Wednesday, the Vatican released the address that Benedict would have delivered on Thursday at La Sapienza. In it, Benedict argues that it is not the role of the papacy, or the church, to impose religious faith upon the secular academy; at the same time, he calls upon the academy to see the church as a repository of moral and spiritual wisdom that can't simply be exiled from the sphere of rationality.

Benedict acknowledges that a secular university must be 'bound exclusively by the authority of the truth,' not by ecclesiastical or political powers, and says that modern society 'needs institutions like this.'

Especially in light of those conciliatory remarks, one might regard the La Sapienza episode as a 'made-in-Italy'

case of overreaction. There are, however, at least two worthwhile lessons one might draw, which I develop in a daily update posting here: [The pope, modern science, and a canary in the coal mine](#) [2].

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