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Beefing up the Catholic in Catholic charities; Top Catholic Islamist takes a break; Covering the Jesuit's General Congregation

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Without a doubt, the push for robust assertion of traditional Catholic identity is the most consequential mega-trend in the life of the church today, and it is also the core of Benedict XVI's agenda as pope. Emboldened by the election of John Paul II in 1978, the identity wave hit the arena of liturgy first, then went on to engulf Catholic education, Catholic media, priestly identity and formation, religious orders, and virtually every other sphere of ecclesiastical life.

Most recently, identity pressures are beginning to swell among church-run charities and social service agencies. It may well be here that the irresistible force of the Catholic identity movement runs most explosively into the immovable object of secular expectations and the civil law.

Recent days have made clear who the Vatican's point man on the Catholic identity of church-run charities is going to be: Cardinal Paul Josef Cordes, the 73-year-old German president of the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum."

Cordes was the main drafter of the second section of Pope Benedict XVI's December 2005 encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, which dealt with the institutional dynamics of Catholic charities, and his elevation as a

cardinal last November was a clear sign of papal support and gratitude. He was on the public stage in Rome again this week, presenting the pope's message for Lent, which focuses this year on giving alms.

In the brief message, Benedict encourages giving aid without fanfare as a gift of self. He argues that countries with a Christian majority have a special responsibility, and says that aiding the poor "is a duty of justice even prior to being an act of charity."

It was Cordes' comments on Catholic charities and secularization, however, in a Tuesday press conference devoted to the Lenten message, which carried the greatest news value.

I asked Cordes about a current case in Colorado, where a proposed measure before the state legislature would bar church-run charities that receive public funding from hiring and firing personnel on the basis of their religious convictions. Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver has threatened to end the services provided by Catholic charities rather than comply.

Faced with such a question, the normal maneuver for a Vatican official would be to say that he doesn't want to get into specific cases, remaining on the level of general principles. Cordes, however, did not mince words in endorsing Chaput's action: "This bishop is doing the right thing," he said. (Speaking in Italian, Cordes' precise words were, "*questo vescovo fa bene.*")

"Theologically, charitable activity and the good deeds of the faithful are always connected to the proclamation of the word," Cordes said. "Service is tied to testimony to the Word of God, and no one must break this connection."

"This points to a great contemporary problem," Cordes said. "Thanks to the generosity of many donors, the charitable agencies of the church are able to do their work. But this carries a risk that the spirit of a Catholic agency can become secularized, doing only what the donor has in view."

"Catholic agencies have to be very careful not to lose their liberty, taking money from donors who later try to introduce a mentality that does not correspond to ecclesiastical objectives," Cordes warned.

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In fact, Cordes said, "Cor Unum" will be sponsoring a spiritual retreat for the directors of Catholic charities in North and South America in June in Guadalajara, Mexico, precisely as a response to this perceived threat of secularization -- which Cordes described as "not the fault" of the directors of Catholic agencies, but rather the surrounding culture.

Capuchin Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, the Preacher of the Papal Household, will lead the retreat, Cordes said.

To put his point into a sound bite, Cordes said, he wants the world to understand "that there's a difference between Caritas and the Red Cross."

Late last week, Cordes also gave an address to the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, a Vatican body that deals with implementation of the Code of Canon Law, in which he suggested that bishops may need more precise canonical tools to oversee and defend the Catholic identity of church-run charitable agencies.

Efforts to beef up the specifically Catholic dimension of church-run charities and social service agencies have already generated collisions with public authorities.

Catholic Charities in Boston, for example, was forced to stop providing adoption services in April 2006 after it failed to win an exemption from a state law which required adoption agencies that receive public funding to provide services to same-sex couples. At roughly the same time, the Archdiocese of San Francisco announced that it would reconsider its participation in a similar program. In February 2007, the English government announced that private adoption agencies that refuse to serve gay couples would no longer receive reimbursements for their services, resulting in the loss of over \$9 million in annual payments to Catholic charities in England.

Of course, church-run social services are hardly the only zone of life where public assertions of church teaching sometimes court secular blow-back.

On Nov. 1, 2004, for example, just one day ahead of the American presidential election between George Bush and John Kerry, U.S. Representative Charles Rangel, a liberal Democrat, published an opinion piece in the *New York Observer* stating that, "By injecting themselves in partisan politics, the bishops have raised a red flag that could cast a shadow on the tax-exempt status of all religious institutions." Similar pressures are growing in Europe. In 2006, the Executive Commission of the European Union ordered Spain to stop exempting the Catholic Church from sales tax. Though that move was not tied to any specific political intervention by the Church, European observers said the subtext was growing hostility between the EU and the leadership of the Catholic Church.

Nor is this sort of veiled threat heard only from the left; conservative organizations in the United States, for example, appealed for a review of the tax-exempt status of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in 2006 after Cardinal Roger Mahony took outspoken positions in favor of immigration reform.

Nonetheless, because charitable enterprises tend to be the type of Catholic institution most likely to receive public funds, to be most dependent upon that funding, and to be engaged in activity that in many ways is essentially secular and humanitarian, it is here where the identity pressures are likely to generate the most political and financial turbulence.

In other words, the "liturgy wars" and the battles over *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II's 1990 document on Catholic education, may yet pale in comparison to the stormy seas ahead in the arena of

Catholic charities. Anyone looking to forecast those tempests would do well to keep an eye on Cordes.

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By any standard, one of the most remarkable Americans in Rome over the last quarter-century has been Jesuit Fr. Thomas Michel, a St. Louis-born expert on Islam who has served the Vatican, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and, for more than a decade now, as head of the Jesuits' Secretariat for Inter-religious Dialogue.

Michel knows the Muslim world from the inside out, speaking its languages and knowing its people. He studied Arabic and Islam in Egypt and Lebanon, did his doctoral dissertation on the 14th century Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyya, and received a Ph.D. in Islamic thought from the University of Chicago. A true citizen of the world, Michel took his Jesuit vows in Indonesia, the world's most populous Islamic country, and is a member of the Jesuits' Indonesian Province. He probably racks up more frequent flier miles moving in and out of Muslim nations than any other Western-born Catholic one might name.

I can testify from personal experience that Michel is one of the few people I know in Rome who can converse freely with waiters at Roman restaurants in Italian, then go back and swap hellos in their own languages with the Egyptians or Lebanese or Turks who often work in the kitchens.

Inevitably, that background makes Michel an object of fascination. For example, when the late journalist Tad Szulc wrote a novel about the 1981 assassination attempt against John Paul II called *To Kill the Pope*, his hero was an American Jesuit expert on Islam secretly called upon by the Vatican to investigate. Szulc was actually compelled to stipulate that this was a fictional character not meant to be Michel.

All this by way of announcing that Michel is leaving Rome. He has completed his term as head of the Jesuit Secretariat on Inter-religious Dialogue, and will spend a year in the United States at the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, D.C. Eventually, he thinks he'll settle into a Jesuit parish in Turkey.

I sat down with Michel on Tuesday, his last day in the office before leaving for Washington. We talked about the current state of Catholic/Muslim relations, and the prospects for dialogue created by the recent letter from 138 Muslim scholars and jurists to Pope Benedict XVI and other Christian leaders, proposing love of God and of neighbor as theological common ground. Pope Benedict is slated to meet with a group of signatories to that letter later this year.

Michel said this will be the first time, at least in the modern era, that a pope will take part in a serious theological conversation with Muslims.

"During the second inter-religious gathering in Assisi, in 1993, John Paul II listened as Muslims explained their views on peace," Michel said, who helped organize meetings of religious leader in Assisi both in 1986 and 1993 while serving in the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. "He wasn't just speaking, he was listening to them. But this was a much more limited conversation."

The normal pattern when Muslims (or leaders of other religions) come to the Vatican, Michel said, is to have a ceremonial event with the pope, but the substantive conversations are held with the president and secretary of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue. In that sense, Michel said, it's important that the pope himself will be at the table.

"It's good for us, for the church, and for the pope to listen to Muslims," he said. "When the conversation is all one-way, something is obviously lacking."

Michel said the letter from the 138 Muslims represents a watershed moment for three reasons:

- First, it reflects a "broad spectrum" from across the Islamic world, representing more than 40 countries, and transcending historical intra-Muslim conflicts pivoting on sect, language, and ethnicity. In that sense, Michel suggested, the letter may be as significant for dialogue among Muslims themselves as it is for Muslim/Christian relations.
- Second, Michel said, "it's about time that somebody moved the conversation off geopolitical conflicts and onto faith questions." Although some Vatican officials have argued that inter-religious dialogue ought to be seen as part of a broader dialogue among cultures, Michel said he doesn't share that view. "Religion is already too often relegated to the status of folklore, of being a mere artifact of culture," he said. "Muslims are making us all aware that if we're not talking directly about God and religion, we're not accomplishing anything."
- Third, Michel pointed out that the letter was "an Arab initiative," led by the Al al Bayt Foundation in Jordan. "In recent decades, most of the initiatives for dialogue from the Muslim side have come from Turks, Iranians, Southeast Asians and Muslims living in the West, in the diaspora," he said. "Central Arab countries haven't shown much leadership. It's important to see them returning to their traditional role."

I asked Michel to comment on one issue certain to surface in any Muslim/Christian conversation: "reciprocity," or the insistence that if Muslim immigrants in the West receive the benefit of religious freedom and protection of law, Christian minorities in the world's 56 majority Muslim states ought to get the same deal.

"We have to be careful," Michel said. "Reciprocity is not a gospel value, but something that comes out of diplomatic and trade negotiations."

It's entirely appropriate, Michel said, to insist that Muslims treat minorities fairly. On the other hand, he said, respect for human dignity can't become a bargaining chip. The true Christian attitude, he said, is to honor the rights of others because of their inherent worth, rather than threatening to withhold equal treatment in order to influence someone else's behavior.

He also said that perceptions of reciprocity differ widely across the Muslim/Christian divide.

"When I talk to Muslims, it's very important to give them concrete instances of when and how we've

respected their rights," he said. "For example, when we've helped them open mosques, or have access to *halal* food, or get time off to pray on Fridays."

It's important to tell those stories, he said, because often what Muslims see from the media or hear about in the street are contrary instances, such as recent images of right-wing Germans parading pigs across grounds where a local Islamic group hopes to build a mosque. Michel said he picked up reactions to those images in far-away locales such as Bangladesh and Indonesia.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in the Muslim "street," Michel said, is that many Muslims struggle to distinguish resentments directed against the American government and the foreign policy of the Bush administration from the West generally, and from Christianity.

In that context, Michel waded directly into contemporary American politics. If the Muslim world had a vote, he said, he's confident it would go overwhelmingly to Democratic candidate Barak Obama.

"I was just in Indonesia, and whenever people found out I was an American, they began shouting, 'Barak Obama! Barak Obama!'" Michel said. He compared that to his experience 40 years ago of entering Palestinian refugee camps and seeing pictures of Egyptian President Gamal Abdle Nasser on one wall and John F. Kennedy on another.

"Kennedy represented something positive to them," Michel said. "There's a longing to be able to support the American ideal of freedom and respect for the rights of persons, but that has been blasted in the last eight years. America is now seen as a global oppressor."

Whatever one makes of the merits of that perception, of course, it's still interesting as a barometer of global attitudes. In that context, Michel predicted that Obama would have a special appeal.

"Throughout the Third World, and especially in the Muslim world, there's a feeling that the world has been run so long by white males -- from their point of view, badly -- that somebody different like Obama would be welcome. My sense is that they'd bend over backwards to give him a break."

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Speaking of the Jesuits, their 35th General Congregation continues in Rome. It's hard to say exactly when it will finish, since it's a sovereign assembly, and only the General Congregation can dissolve itself. Many Jesuits, however, say March 15 is a good bet as an outer limit, since their rooms are already promised to other parties for Holy Week, which begins March 16. The consensus guess at the moment is that the session will wrap up sometime around March 1.

For reporters, covering the General Congregation can be a frustrating exercise. Like other religious orders, the Jesuits conduct their business behind closed doors in order to protect the freedom and

independence of their judgments. That's entirely understandable, but it does make the appetite for news difficult to satisfy.

In theory, the roughly 225 Jesuits taking part in the General Congregation are not supposed to be talking to the media, at least without formal permission. As always, however, such regulations are not air-tight. When I e-mailed a lunch invitation to one Jesuit I know, for example, he wrote back wondering if he should seek approval. I suggested that rather than treating it as an encounter with a journalist, he chalk it up as a chat among two guys who've met on the lecture circuit.

Here was his response: "Sounds like Jesuitical reasoning to me, and I suppose it works."

Still, caution is in the air. When I arranged to meet another participant outside the Jesuit Curia one evening for dinner, we happened to bump into fellow Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, who is also taking part in the General Congregation, and whose day job is serving as Pope Benedict XVI's spokesperson.

"I hope you're not giving away any secrets," Lombardi cautioned his brother Jesuit. He was laughing, but one had the impression it wasn't entirely a joke.

I'll have a piece on the General Congregation in the Feb. 8 issue of the *National Catholic Reporter* (available at NCRonline.org Feb. 5). In the meantime, extended coverage of the Jesuits and their new leader, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, can be found on my Daily News and Updates column; scroll down to see all the pieces.

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Finally, here's a small item worth recording, under the heading of "women and the church."

It has long been observed that the Vatican is very much a "boy's club," and no corner of Vatican real estate is more a bastion of male prerogative than the window of the pope's private apartment where he delivers his weekly Sunday Angelus address.

Imagine the raised eyebrows in Rome on Sunday, Jan. 27, therefore, when a young Italian girl appeared from that window to deliver a brief talk related to Catholic Action's annual "Month for Peace."

In the past, two members of Catholic Action, often a boy and a girl, have appeared alongside the pope on the occasion, usually to help him launch a dove into the sky as a symbol of peace. This was the first time ever, however, that a female actually stood behind the papal lectern and addressed the crowd in St. Peter's Square.

One shouldn't over-interpret the significance of the gesture, but in a small way it does suggest that even in

the papal apartment, doors (or, in this case, windows) are opening for Catholic women.

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