

## Eight questions American Catholics are asking

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 7, 2008 All Things Catholic

Over a six-day stretch from last Wednesday through this Tuesday, I gave five presentations in four cities. The series kicked off last week when I served as the closing act at the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, D.C. (I was publicly blessed at the end by Msgr. Ray East of St. Teresa of Avila Parish -- and when you're blessed by the dynamic Msgr. East, let me tell you, you feel it.)

Over the weekend, I delivered two presentations at the annual Religious Education Congress in Anaheim, Calif., a beehive of some 40,000 catechists, educators and Catholic activists that always feels like a mad adrenaline rush. I then spoke Monday night in Thousand Oaks, California, as part of a remarkable 10-parish Lenten faith formation program called "The University." My mini-barnstorming tour ended Tuesday night in Denver, where I spoke at the John Paul II Center at the invitation of Archbishop Charles Chaput.

In one way or another, these presentations focused on my "Mega-Trends in Catholicism" project, attempting to identify the most important forces shaping the Catholic future, and/or Pope Benedict XVI's looming April 15-20 visit to the United States.

The experience was exhilarating - in part because I was blessed with gracious hosts and engaged audiences, but mostly because it gave me an opportunity to reconnect with Catholics "in the trenches" in various parts of the country, discovering anew what's on their minds, what their concerns are, and what questions they have as we ponder together the future of the church. As usual, the audiences seemed to represent a fairly wide cross-section of ages, life experiences, and theological and political views.

This week I'll present eight questions that cropped up repeatedly during Q&A sessions. The exercise offers an unscientific sense of what at least some American Catholics are thinking about a month ahead of the pope's visit.

### **Isn't the rise of fanatical Muslim fundamentalism the most dangerous force facing the church?**

Of course, it's a real danger, and one that clearly has the attention of Benedict XVI. In a nutshell, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism was the subtext to Benedict's now-famous Sept. 12, 2006, lecture at the University of Regensburg, featuring his warning that faith without reason becomes intolerance, fanaticism and violence.

On the other hand, intolerance is not the only story in the Islamic world. There are some 56 majority Muslim nations, and in many, Christians and Muslims live cheek-by-jowl without great difficulty. Conflict always gets more attention than peace. Zachary Karabell's recent book *Peace Be Upon You: Fourteen Centuries of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Coexistence in the Middle East*

is a good corrective in this regard.

If you look around today, there are encouraging signs; for example, a brand new Catholic church, Our Lady of the Rosary, is being dedicated on March 15 in Doha in Qatar, right on the Arabian Peninsula. It's the first Christian church consecrated in Qatar since the arrival of Islam 1,400 years ago, and was constructed on land donated by the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani.

Another sign of hope came with a letter last fall from 138 Muslim jurists, scholars and clerics titled "A Common Word between Us and You." Addressed to Benedict XVI and 25 other Christian leaders, it proposed love of God and love of neighbor as the basis for theological common ground between Christianity and Islam. This week, a group of signatories of that letter travelled to Rome to meet with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, in order to plan for a session involving Pope Benedict XVI Nov. 4-6. Participants agreed to set up a permanent "Catholic-Muslim Forum" to keep lines of communication open.

That said, there are real challenges across the Islamic world. Saudi Arabia offers one classic example: It's a landmass three and a half times the size of Texas in which it's illegal to build churches, import Bibles, wear crosses or other Christian symbols, and worship in either public or private. This is despite the fact that there are an estimated one million Catholics in Saudi Arabia, most of them Lebanese, Indian, and Filipino guest workers. One important variable in changing this equation will likely be the extent to which religious freedom becomes a foreign policy priority of Western governments -- because until the Saudis feel there's a real political and economic "price" to be paid, it's not clear that much will change.

**The pope seems to have an 'image problem' among scientists, with the recent protests against his appearance at La Sapienza University in Rome offering an example. Where exactly does he stand on Creationism?**

Benedict XVI is not a Creationist, meaning a Biblical literalist who insists that creation occurred exactly as described in the poetic accounts which open the Book of Genesis. Benedict is also not a proponent of what Americans call "Intelligent Design," understood as a rival scientific hypothesis to evolution. Of course, the pope is a staunch believer in the doctrine of Creation, and he insists that ultimately human life is not simply the result of random evolutionary forces.

The best summary of Benedict's thought comes from his own 1990 book *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*. Here's the relevant passage:

*"What response shall we make to this view [evolution]? It is the affair of the natural sciences to explain how the tree of life in particular continues to grow, and how new branches shoot out from it. This is not a matter for faith. ? We are faced here with two complementary -- rather than mutually exclusive -- realities."*

It's worth recalling that then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was still in charge of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2004 when its main advisory body, the International Theological Commission, issued its document "Communion and Stewardship: Human Beings Created in the Image of God." In a nutshell, that text said that while the church cannot settle the debate between "intelligent design" and evolution on a scientific level, as a philosophical matter either theory is perfectly consistent with the notion of God's providence and Christian doctrine on creation. Citing Thomas Aquinas, the commission held that God can work through

mechanisms that appear to us to be random and contingent just as easily as he can work through strict physical causation.

I suspect that much of the confusion on this subject stems from a failure to keep clear the distinction between evolution as a scientific hypothesis, and "evolutionism" as a philosophical system that would exclude any role for God. Benedict regards the former as a matter for natural sciences, but obviously draws the line at the latter.

### **What would the election of a Third World pope mean for the church?**

In the first place, it would put a face on where the Catholic population is today. Of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, almost 750 million live in Africa, Asia and Latin America, meaning that two-thirds of all the Catholics alive are today in the global South. The election of a pope from the south would be a dramatic way of underlining the universality of the Catholic church. Such a pope could perhaps also give voice to the aspirations, and the struggles, of the developing world.

Beyond that, however, what impact it might have would depend on the personality of the pope, and on what's happening in the world at the time he's elected. The fact that John Paul II was Polish clearly had enormous consequences for the history of his time; the fact that Benedict XVI is Bavarian has not in itself generated quite the same drama. (With Benedict, the more salient frame of reference is the Western "dictatorship of relativism.") It all depends on the circumstances and a given pope's own sense of priorities.

### **Doesn't the recent Pew Forum survey on religion in America contain troubling findings for the Catholic church?**

In some ways, yes. The results show that roughly one-tenth of the adult population in the United States is made up of former Catholics. Slightly more than 31 percent of Americans say they were raised Catholic, while just over 24 percent say they're Catholic today. Without the impact of Hispanic immigration, the Catholic share of the American population would be in decline. All this suggests that the Catholic church has some work to do in terms of evangelization and retention.

On the other hand, Catholicism retains roughly 70 percent of its membership, according to the Pew findings, meaning that its rate of loss is not among the highest for American denominations. (That dubious distinction belongs to the Jehovah's Witnesses.) Moreover, the high rate of Hispanic immigration means that over time Catholicism is likely to gain, rather than lose, "market share" in the United States.

More basically, the Pew Forum results confirm what anyone who pays attention to religion in America already knew: that the United States remains an intensely religious society, with even a significant percentage of the religiously unaffiliated professing some form of "believing without belonging." In other words, we are a highly competitive religious marketplace. That means that no religious institution in this culture can go to sleep -- if you fail to provide satisfying pastoral care to your people, someone else will do it for you. Fundamentally, however, competition is as healthy in religion as in any other zone of life. It keeps religious institutions honest, forces them to hustle, and elevates the overall level of religious activism in the culture. After all, some 44 percent of Americans wouldn't have switched religious affiliation at some point in their lives if they weren't looking for something.

### **In light of the priest shortage, will the Vatican take another look at married priests?**

In principle, priestly celibacy is not a doctrinal question and therefore could be reconsidered. Yet in the West it has become a lightning rod for deeper divisions in the church, from the identity of the priesthood to the authority of tradition. This polarization, however, is not characteristic of the global South, where bishops and theologians often approach the question more practically. Struggling with severe priest shortages, their basic concern is how to deliver pastoral care, especially in isolated rural areas or in the peripheries of mega-cities.

At the 2005 Synod on the Eucharist, for example, several Southern bishops mentioned areas in the developing world, including Latin America and the Pacific Islands, where isolated communities strung out over vast distances often go without priests for long periods of time. Bishop Roberto Camilleri Azzopardo of Comayaga, Honduras, reported having one priest for every 16,000 Catholics in his diocese. Privately, several bishops suggested that the church might consider the ordination of *virii probati*, meaning tested married men, to serve these communities. Led largely by bishops from the North, however, the synod instead reaffirmed the discipline of celibacy.

It's possible that a future Southern pope, or a future synod more influenced by voices from the South, may revisit the issue. Sometime in the 21st century, limited experiments with the *virii probati* might be approved. It's improbable that the Catholic church will ever simply abandon priestly celibacy, and under almost any scenario one can imagine, celibacy will remain the norm for members of religious orders. Nevertheless, pragmatic Southern leadership may be willing to consider limited exceptions to accommodate specific pastoral needs.

### **Who seems to be doing well in terms of missionary expansion around the world?**

By most measures, Christian Pentecostalism. From less than six percent of world Christianity in the mid-1970s, Pentecostals finished the century representing almost 20 percent, according to a 2006 study by the Pew Forum called "Spirit and Power." Combining organized Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ, plus the vast galaxy of independent churches around the world with a Pentecostal flavor, such as the African Zionists, the Spiritual Baptists in the Caribbean, and the True Jesus Church in China, brings the total worldwide number of Pentecostals to around 380 million. That would make Pentecostalism the second-largest Christian "denomination" on earth, lagging behind only Roman Catholicism.

As remarkable as those numbers are, they underestimate the real Pentecostal footprint. Established Christian denominations have also spawned their own versions of Pentecostalism, usually called Charismatics. Combining Pentecostals and Charismatics into an amalgam scholars refer to as "Revivalist Christianity" brings the global total to a staggering 600 million.

Trying to account for the global expansion of Pentecostalism is one of the more wide-open parlor games in religious sociology today. Among the most commonly cited factors are: a competitive, entrepreneurial spirit; the fact that Pentecostalism "travels light," not requiring a heavy ecclesial infrastructure; a lay-led approach to mission; an upbeat spirituality that compensates for a post-modern "ecstasy deficit"; and a strong sense of community.

One final note: While Pentecostalism often eats away at the raw numbers of Catholics, sometimes it can be an index of religious ferment that, in the long run, may also benefit Catholicism. In his 2008 book *Conversion of a Continent*, Dominican Fr. Edward Cleary argues that Latin America is in the grip of a religious upheaval, with Pentecostalism as its leading edge. Catholicism, Cleary says, is also becoming more dynamic in Latin America,

generating higher levels of commitment among those who remain. Cleary believes that this Catholic awakening had its roots in lay movements that go back to the 1930s and '40s, but it's been jump-started by healthy competition from the Pentecostals. Clearly argues that despite its statistical losses, Catholicism in Latin America is actually much stronger because of the Pentecostal presence.

### **What will we see first: a woman president or women priests?**

That's an easy one. Since there's no doctrinal bar to a woman president, it's simply a question of a female candidate being able to get enough votes - and whatever eventually happens to Hillary Clinton in 2008, the evidence of this campaign would suggest we're probably not that far away. On women priests, however, there is a serious doctrinal obstacle. Without entering into the merits of that question, it seems clear that given today's strong pressure surrounding Catholic identity, women won't be ordained anytime soon.

What I suspect we will see throughout the 21st century, however, is a continuing effort to empower women in the church in all ways short of sacramental ordination. In the United States, 48.4 percent of all administrative positions in dioceses today are held by women, and at the most senior levels, 26.8 percent of executive positions are held by women. Perceptions of patriarchal bias aside, the Catholic church actually does better in this regard than many other institutions. A 2005 study of Fortune 500 companies found that women hold only 16.4 percent of corporate officer positions and just 6.4 percent of the top earner positions. Similarly, a 2007 study by the American Bar Association found that just 16 percent of the members of the top law firms' governing committees are women, and only 5 percent of managing partners are female. According to a 2004 report from the Department of Defense, women held just 12.7 of positions at the grade of major or above.

Even in the Vatican, there are signs of movement. No woman at all worked in the Roman Curia until 1952, when Pius XII created the Permanent Committee for International Congresses of the Lay Apostolate and appointed Australian lay woman Rosemary Goldie as its Executive Secretary. Things changed significantly over the following half-century. According to a 2005 report from the Catholic News Service, by the end of John Paul's pontificate women were 21 percent of Vatican personnel, even if they rarely broke through to the most senior levels.

Under John Paul II, two barriers for women in the Vatican were shattered. In 2004, he appointed Salesian Sr. Enrica Rosanna to the position of under-secretary in the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the first time a woman had ever been named as to a superior-level position in the Vatican. Also in 2004, John Paul tapped Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon as the President of the Pontifical Academy for Social Sciences, the first woman to head a pontifical academy. (Glendon is now the U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See.) None of this augurs a revolution, but it is an indication of things to come.

The rise of the Charismatic impulse will also push Catholicism in this direction, since it encourages spontaneous, non-institutional participation that's as open to women as it is to men. There's an implicit egalitarianism in the Pentecostal movement that has allowed women to assume new roles in surprising ways. One of the most powerful Pentecostal pastors of the 20th century, for example, was Aimee Semple McPherson, founder of the Foursquare Church. "Sister Aimee" was, among other unusual accomplishments for her time, the first woman to own a radio station west of the Mississippi River. As Catholicism across much of the global South is progressively "Pentecostalized," we'll likely see more of this informal, charismatic leadership by women.

## What should we look for when Benedict XVI is in the United States?

At the level of media coverage, I suspect the two questions that will loom largest, especially in the early stages of the trip, is what Benedict XVI will say about the sexual abuse crisis, and whether there will be any fallout from his presence for the Catholic vote in the '08 elections.

In terms of the pope's own agenda, I expect variations on what has become a key theme of his papacy: "affirmative orthodoxy." By that, I mean a tenacious defense of the core elements of classic Catholic doctrine, presented in a relentlessly positive key. Benedict appears convinced that the gap between the faith and contemporary secular culture has its roots in a widespread tendency to see Christianity as a largely negative system of prohibitions and controls. In effect, he wants to go back to the beginning, reintroducing Christianity from the ground up in terms of what it's for rather than what it's against.

Four examples of "affirmative orthodoxy":

- In *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict presented a vision of sexual morality without rehearsing the church's well-known prohibitions on birth control, abortion and gay marriage;
- Benedict recently said that the church no longer requires the theological hypothesis of limbo, since it's enough to trust in the loving mercy of God;
- In *Spe Salvi*, Benedict wrote that the doctrine of the Last Judgment is not a warning but a promise of hope;
- In his Dec. 21 address to the Roman Curia, Benedict argued that the motive for mission is not that souls will otherwise be lost, but rather that so that the peace and reconciliation of the Kingdom of God can reach their maximum potential in history.

Of course, how persuasive "affirmative orthodoxy" will prove to modern women and men, or whether it ultimately does justice to the challenge presented by modernity, remains to be seen, but it does seem to be the most original flourish in Benedict's teaching and "style."

One final note of caution about the trip: Paradoxically, Benedict XVI is a master communicator who occasionally struggles with a communications problem. He's a highly "Catholic-encoded" figure, meaning that he sometimes speaks a Catholic insider's language that can be difficult for the outside world to follow. That can have explosive consequences, as we've seen in Regensburg, Brazil, and elsewhere. It will be interesting to watch how well the pope and his chief "translators" anticipate that danger this time around.

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