

Canada's evangelical Catholics

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 30, 2008 All Things Catholic

During the John Paul II years, Canada often loomed, at least at the level of stereotypes, as a holdout to the wave of "evangelical Catholicism" cresting through the church, meaning a recovery of traditional markers of Catholic faith and practice plus new boldness about proclaiming the faith in public. After the 1997 Synod for America in Rome, Fr. Richard John Neuhaus memorably described the Canadian bishops as belonging to "the *National Catholic Reporter* wing of the church," by which he meant a liberal, reform-oriented outlook.

Whether that was something to celebrate or to rue was, perhaps, in the eye of the beholder, but the image seemed clear enough.

Today, a new wind seems to be blowing. For those who know a bit of Canadian history, one might almost say that the church is approaching a second, albeit less dramatic, "Quiet Revolution" -- this time involving not the implosion of a homogenous Catholic culture, but rather the construction of a vibrant Catholic sub-culture, more inclined to push back against Canada's prevailing secular consensus.

At the level of senior leadership, the transformation has been remarkably rapid. Of Canada's 18 archdioceses, 12 are now led by bishops appointed since Italian Archbishop Luigi Ventura, the current Apostolic Nuncio, arrived in 2001. Seven of those new bishops were appointed or installed in 2007 alone. (The real number is actually eight, since Archbishop Michael Miller was also named coadjutor in Vancouver that year, and should take over in relatively short order.) The impact has been especially noticeable among the country's English-speaking bishops, with additional appointments in Quebec likely in the next few years.

On that basis, Canadians may eventually come to refer to "Ventura bishops" a bit like Americans once talked about "Jadot bishops," referring to the former nuncio in the United States, Belgian Archbishop Jean Jadot, whose nominations during the 1970s gave a clear shape to the American church. While Jadot bishops were seen as reformers and social activists, the typical Ventura bishop is strong on matters of doctrine and Catholic identity, ready to challenge the de facto exile of religion from public life, yet at the same time personable and active at the pastoral level.

I was in Toronto this week for the May 28-30 Catholic Media Convention, a gathering of more than 400 Catholic journalists and media personnel from across North America. The stop also gave me a chance to "take the temperature," so to speak, of Canadian Catholicism. With 13 million Catholics, Canada is the 17th largest Catholic country in the world, and the fourth-largest where English is a principal language after the Philippines, the United States, and Nigeria.

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I spoke on Tuesday with Ventura at the Toronto headquarters of Salt and Light Television, Canada's Catholic TV network. The following are a few snippets from that conversation.

NCR: You've been in Canada seven years now. What has impressed you?

Archbishop Ventura: Canada is trying to build a society that has its own identity, but it's a changing identity. Part of what has to be defined is the place of religion, especially in public life. I think there's a growing awareness that religion does have importance for public life, and for political life, though not in the sense of direct political influence. ? Sometimes, however, there's a kind of secular ideology being pushed, which appears to be neutral, but in reality is imposing a view on people. The danger, and I phrase it as a danger, is to build a state that claims to give everything to people, but in reality takes everything away.

NCR: What do you see happening in the Canadian church?

Archbishop Ventura: There's movement, particularly among the young generation ? you can see that they're looking for something. I sense a new desire to be church without what I would call the "Oedipus complex" of the past. By that, I mean an instinct that hates the father and mother, and is constantly trying to get away from them. These people aren't rebelling against a paternalistic church that provided everything to them, and now they want to throw it away and be on their own. There's been some of that in Canada, this sense of wanting to be free from the church. Today's youth, however, have no point of reference. They have everything they want, except a father-figure that teaches and guides them. They're looking for positive models to fill their hearts. You find Catholic youth today, some organized and some not, interested in recovering a strong sense of faith.

Sometimes there's a generation gap, even among pastoral agents, between the older generation and a new one. These younger Catholics are sometimes called the "John Paul II Generation" because he started this movement, and he gave them great enthusiasm. It's continuing ? the identification of being Christian, being Catholic, prayer, fidelity, universality, the sense of being part of a great family of faith, even with all its weakness.

NCR: Sometimes young people who fit the profile you're describing are labeled 'conservative' or 'traditionalist.' Do you find them to be so?

Archbishop Ventura: No, they're not. If you're using these terms, you're referring to an ideological frame of reference. You already have a particular scheme in mind. Instead, you have to judge from the signs, from what is going on, from the goodness and the witness they're giving. Sometimes, the perspective is that if they think like you, they're good. If they don't, they're fanatics, they're integralists, and so on. ? I think it's a matter of identity, of being what you are, the authenticity of being Christian and being Catholic. That doesn't mean you to have to be closed or defensive, far from it. It's a matter of living the gift we have received, without excluding or condemning anybody.

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Archbishop Thomas Collins of Toronto, who replaced Cardinal Aloysius Ambrozic in January 2007, is in some ways a classic example of a "Ventura bishop." He comes off as affable, gregarious, and unpretentious, while committed to a robust sense of traditional Catholic identity.

I spoke with Collins on Wednesday at Toronto's St. Augustine's Seminary, on the margins of a retreat he was preaching for the priests of the archdiocese. The following are excerpts from that conversation.

NCR: One word that seems to come up in describing the new crop of Canadian bishops, yourself included, is 'evangelical.'

Archbishop Collins: I hope so. One of things I'm talking about in this retreat with priests is St. Paul, preaching the gospel, reaching out. ? We've got to be moving out into the secular world. As much as I admire Catholic journals and the Catholic media, I'm reminded that G.K. Chesterton wrote in the Illustrated London News. Later he wrote for a Catholic weekly, but most of his life was out in the secular world. We've got to do what we can in-house, we have to look at the gathered, but we've got to look at the scattered as well.

NCR: Part of what people mean by calling you 'evangelical' is a willingness to challenge the prevailing secular consensus.

Archbishop Collins: Oh, absolutely. ? This is a very secular society, definitely not the United States. In Canada, there's a strong push among the ruling elite to address the issue of a multicultural and multi-religious society by saying, "Let us drain the public forum of all religion." The secular society would thus not really be the society of this age, which is what it should be, but a society drained of anything. It's iconic that after 9/11, in the country where it actually happened, everybody went to a cathedral where the president and religious leaders prayed. In the country to the north, which also lost people, the event was held on Parliament Hill, with nary a reference to God. I wasn't there, but somebody told me that the only hymn was "Imagine," an atheist hymn. We're all conscious of the Swiss Air tragedy. [In 1998, a Swiss Air flight crashed off the coast of Nova Scotia, killing all 229 people on board.] After that tragedy, there was a "God-free" public service. That's one alternative [for a multicultural society], and I think it's absolutely wrong-headed.

NCR: So the new Canadian bishops are determined to push back?

Archbishop Collins: I think so. We've had enough. We're here, and we're part of this society. As I often point out, if someone's vulnerable and on the street in Toronto, it's someone motivated by religion who's going to help them. We're there on the street, we walk the talk. Therefore, we have a place at the table. We've earned it, quite apart from the fact that all but 16 percent of the Canadian population claims some sort of religious affiliation, at least when approached by the census. I think the idea that the solution to a multiethnic, multi-religious, multicultural society is to deny the profound reality in the lives of the vast majority of the population, which is religion, is just bizarre. Why should we sit here and let that happen? I'm not talking about replacing this model with a theocracy. Obviously we've had that in history. The church is always healthiest when it's not in power, so I'm not recommending that. We should not be in power, but we're here, and we have a right to speak.

NCR: To what extent is this evangelical spirit present at the grass roots?

Archbishop Collins: I feel extraordinary hope. I had this hilarious experience last year, after I had just ordained six guys to the priesthood. We were outside going around taking photographs in a little courtyard beside the church. This reporter came up to me, looking soulfully into my eyes, and asked me to talk about the failure of people to respond to vocations to the priesthood and the disaster looming over the church. I said, "Well, I just ordained six of them. Talk to them, they're over there." He said, "But what about the failure and the falling apart of the church, people drifting away?" That's just not my reality. Sure, those things are real, but it's not the whole story.

NCR: It sounds like you're trying to project a robust Catholic identity, but one that's outward-looking rather than moving into a ghetto.

Archbishop Collins: Definitely not a ghetto. We're part of the society. We're good friends with all our neighbors of many faiths, and with the secularists too. I think we should engage in hearty discussions with all kinds of people. I got a letter recently from a guy who was raised a Catholic, who wanted me to excommunicate him. He said he didn't believe this and that, and he was upset with the Catholic church. I wrote back, because I'm sure he's really a nice guy. I wish I had told him to come by for a cup of coffee so we could talk about it. What I said was that far from excommunicating you, I pray that God will bless you abundantly. I suggested that he might want to read Joseph Ratzinger's *Introduction to Christianity*, because he takes atheism quite seriously. He doesn't dismiss it at all. I also suggested the Gospel of Mark ? just take a crack at it. I think we need to get out there and do that, meet people where they are.

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Among other things, this week's Catholic Media Convention in Toronto brought together a number of heavy-hitters in Catholic communications. They included American Cardinal John Foley, former president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications; Italian Archbishop Claudio Celli, the current occupant of that post; and Italian Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson.

In effect, the three-day event showcases the current thinking of Catholic officialdom about the communications enterprise.

Lombardi offered a few behind-the-scenes glimpses at the Vatican's media operation. A few days after every papal trip, he said, John Paul would have lunch with top advisors who would go over how the trip had been covered in the press. He did this every time, Lombardi said, even after his 100th trip, "when one would have thought he already understood how the media functions." Lombardi said Benedict XVI does the same thing.

Those lunches, Lombardi said, "say a lot about the two popes' relationship with the media, about their attention to the media as a dimension of everyday life, about their awareness that the media are fundamental and necessary for spreading any message."

Lombardi argued that John Paul II was an unparalleled "teacher of peoples," operating at a level above partisan politics and special interests. With his recent trip to the United States, Lombardi said, Benedict XVI is moving down the same path.

Lombardi invoked Benedict's blunt talk in the United States about the sexual abuse crisis as a model for church communicators. He conceded that Benedict's choice to reply to my question about the crisis aboard the papal plane in off-the-cuff English "surprised even me."

"It is vitally important to tell the truth with clarity and simplicity," Lombardi said. "Every ambiguity, every reticence and, worse still, every intentional concealment of the truth, will exact a dear price in the end."

Lombardi said that Benedict is growing into his role as a public figure, pointing to the trip to Turkey, for example, when the pope paused inside the Blue Mosque for a moment of silent prayer alongside the Grand Mufti of Istanbul -- "an image worth dozens of theoretical statements about respect for Islam," Lombardi said.

"Benedict is no longer just a great teacher," Lombardi said. "More and more he is becoming an engagingly human pastor."

For his part, Celli told the convention on Wednesday morning that "Jesus of Nazareth must always be at the heart of our proclamation," but that "how we present him to a changing world has to be continually adapted to a new context."

Since taking over from Foley at the Pontifical Council for Social Communications last June, Celli has been busy trying to give himself an education in that context on a global scale. Last year he visited 19 countries in Latin America, and this year he's focusing on Africa. Next year, Celli's office plans to organize a major international conference on the Catholic press, attempting to foster a broader global sensitivity among those responsible for church communications.

Celli argued that the human heart naturally feels a yearning for ultimacy, which he called "nostalgia for God." That instinct, he says, creates a basis for communication even with people who don't share the specifics of the Catholic faith, or any particular religious conviction.

"True communication demands openness to the basic yearning," Celli said.

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Finally, here's an item from the "Only in the Catholic Church" files. As is often the case with priceless Catholic anecdotes, this one comes from Foley, a native Philadelphian who is currently Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. He told the story during a Mass on Tuesday in Toronto at Salt and Light Television, Canada's Catholic television network.

Foley was recently in Paris for a ceremony of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, which involved a visit to the Cathedral of Notre Dame. The rector of the cathedral explained to him that Notre Dame houses a relic that tradition regards as the Crown of Thorns, the woven set of thorny branches mockingly placed atop Christ's head by Roman soldiers during his crucifixion. Foley expressed surprise, saying that he knew the Crown of Thorns was once located at the chapel of Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, but he wasn't sure what had happened to it after the French Revolution.

Foley was invited to venerate the Crown of Thorns, which devotees regard as one of the most precious relics in all of Christian history. It was placed on a small table, and Foley knelt before it for a few moments of prayer.

When he was finished, Foley said, he placed his hands on the table in order to support himself as he stood up. What he had not anticipated, however, was that the table wasn't fastened to the floor, so putting his weight on one side caused it to suddenly lurch forward, sending the Crown of Thorns flying into the air!

In the event, Foley said, the nimble rector nabbed the Crown of Thorns as it tumbled toward the floor. Foley said he was immensely grateful, because otherwise, "I might have been responsible for causing it to once again be lost to the church."

Ever alert to opportunities for a punch-line, Foley said that with the benefit of hindsight, he wished the Crown of Thorns would have landed on the rector's head. Then he could have used his French to exclaim, "*Voilà ? un miracle de Dieu!*"

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