

## Top 10 neglected Catholic stories of 2008

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 24, 2008 All Things Catholic

For most media outlets in the United States, there were really only two big Catholic stories in 2008: Pope Benedict XVI's April 15-20 visit to Washington and New York, and the fate of the "Catholic vote" in the November elections.

Both, of course, were important tales to tell, and for the most part church officials have no right to complain. Saturation coverage of the pope's trip alone probably meant the Catholic church drew more positive notice in '08 than in most years, especially recently.

Yet inevitably, plenty of other important Catholic stories flew below the radar. To remedy that, here's a rundown of the "Top Ten Neglected Catholic Stories of the Year."

### 10. Benedict's "Second Act" in France

While the pope's trip to America drew bell-to-bell coverage, his Sept. 12-15 visit to France might as well have been on the dark side of the moon in terms of American media interest. That's too bad, because it offered "volume II" of Benedict's reflections on church/state relations. In the States, Benedict praised a model of church/state separation that, in his view, means freedom *for* religion rather than freedom *from* religion. In France, he closed the loop by challenging their model of *laïcité*, which the pope sees as exiling religion from public life. That's likely to be a battleground for some time to come, since *laïcité* is more or less presupposed by the architects of the new Europe.

### 9. O'Brien and the Legionaries of Christ

In June, Archbishop Edwin O'Brien of Baltimore demanded greater transparency from the Legionaries of Christ and their lay arm, Regnum Christi, and barred them from one-on-one spiritual direction with anyone under 18. The fact that O'Brien, who is no one's idea of a doctrinal liberal, took those steps suggested that controversy surrounding the Legionaries is not merely about the usual left/right tensions. The story raised larger questions about how to balance the zeal and missionary spirit of some of the "new movements" against the need for proper oversight and accountability.

### 8. The Bishops and Immigration

Amid suggestions that the American bishops had a single-issue focus on abortion, their outspoken approach to immigration sometimes got lost. In September, the bishops called upon the Department of Homeland Security to halt immigration raids, asserting that the "humanitarian cost" was "unacceptable in a civilized society." Over the summer, Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles asserted that "a human being's worth is defined by their God-given dignity, not by what papers they carry." That position brought blowback; an invitation to generosity by

Benedict XVI during his visit, for example, caused CNN's Lou Dobbs to fume, and some conservatives threatened to challenge the church's tax exemptions if it pushes a pro-immigrant line. While the election of Barack Obama augurs battles over the "life issues," immigration reform may be an area where the bishops and the new administration can do business.

## **7. Ups and Downs in Dialogue**

In November, a new "Catholic/Muslim Forum," meeting in Rome, symbolized commitment to dialogue in the wake of Benedict's controversial citation two years ago of a Byzantine emperor to the effect that Muhammad brought things "only evil and inhuman." The forum concluded with a statement recognizing a right to religious freedom. It will meet again in 2010, in a Muslim nation. Meanwhile, Catholic/Jewish ties saw new flashpoints. The year began with fallout from revival of the old Latin liturgy, including a Good Friday prayer for conversion of Jews. The prayer was amended by the Vatican, though not to everyone's satisfaction. In June, the U.S. bishops deleted a line from their catechism that said the Mosaic covenant "remains eternally valid." (The bishops said the line wasn't wrong, just misunderstood.) In September, Benedict praised Pope Pius XII, whom some Jews fault for alleged "silence" on the Holocaust. Despite these tensions, most experts say Catholic/Jewish relations remain sound, and Benedict's visit to the Park East Synagogue in New York reaffirmed his desire for "bridges of friendship."

## **6. Benedict's Unique Shade of Green**

Throughout '08, the pope continued to craft his distinct form of Christian environmentalism, in a way seemingly destined to give everybody heartburn. To conservatives, Benedict insisted that the doctrine of creation requires engagement from the church on issues such as the rainforests or climate change, whatever fears they may have about baptizing Greenpeace; for liberals, Benedict asserted that ecology cannot be separated from the church's defense of other aspects of creation, such as unborn life and marriage. One sign that this budding environmentalism has made some people nervous is that Benedict felt compelled to lay it out one more time in his year-end address to the Roman Curia, where popes often try to reassure their lieutenants about aspects of their activity which have raised eyebrows in the Vatican.

## **5. Changing of the Guard at the CTSA**

Fairly or unfairly, the Catholic Theological Society of America has long been seen as the leading forum for the church's "loyal opposition." The group's June meeting in Miami, however, was devoted to the theme of "generations," and it gave voice to a rising cohort of younger theologians -- at least some of whom appear less interested in challenging the church than secular culture, and for whom the traditional polarization between left and right doesn't hold much appeal. What that might mean for the future of Catholic theology in America will be a fascinating trend to track.

## **4. The Synod on the Bible**

Synods of Bishops in Rome are easy to write off as expensive talk-shops, but for those with ears to hear, they offer a unique sounding board for currents in the global church. The Oct. 5-26 synod dedicated to the Bible offered a case in point; among other things, contributions from bishops from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and other parts of the world suggested that the struggle against secularism is to some extent a Western preoccupation. In the end, a basically moderate line seemed to prevail; in their final propositions, the bishops called for admitting women to the ministry of lector, and gave a strong thumbs-up for lay-led liturgies of the Word and for small ecclesial communities.

## **3. Identity Pressures on Catholic Charities**

Efforts to assert a strong sense of traditional Catholic identity represent a leading 'mega-trend' in the church these days, and in 2008 those efforts reached down into Catholic charities. In January, Cardinal Paul Josef Cordes, the Vatican's top official for charitable activity, endorsed Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput's threat to shut down church-run charities if the state barred them from hiring on the basis of religious affiliation. Later in the year, Catholic Relief Services faced criticism that some of its HIV/AIDS prevention materials promoted condoms, and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development came under fire for its links to the controversial community organizing network ACORN. Collectively, all this suggests that charitable agencies will face growing pressure to be sure that they consistently 'think with the church.'

## **2. The Jesuits Come in from the Cold**

The John Paul years were occasionally marked by tension between the Society of Jesus and the papacy -- which, to the outside world, offered a symbol of the alienation of moderate-to-progressive Catholics from the church's leadership. The election of a new Jesuit superior in January created a chance for Benedict XVI and the Jesuits to turn a new page, and by most accounts, it worked. Some Jesuits said they actually wept with joy after a Feb. 21 audience when Benedict told them, 'The church needs you, counts on you, and continues to turn to you with confidence.' Benedict has also put his money where his mouth is, naming Jesuits to key posts such as Vatican spokesperson and secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. While this rapprochement doesn't mean everything is sweetness and light, it at least suggests that the order is back on good speaking terms with the Shepherd-in-Chief.

## **1. The Crisis in India**

The anti-Christian violence that broke out in India over the summer was hardly just a Catholic story, but Catholics were dramatically affected: A lay Catholic missionary was burnt alive as she tried to rescue children from a church-run orphanage; a young nun was raped; parishes, convents, hospitals and schools were sacked. Beyond the human toll, the crisis offered an important wake-up call. India is a rising power, but it also faces a rapidly metastasizing form of Hindu extremism. If things break the wrong way, the Indian subcontinent could become the new Middle East -- a perpetually destabilized region whose animosities seed conflict around the world, radicalizing a global Hindu diaspora. India is also a great 20th century Catholic success story. The church exploded from less than two million faithful to 18 million, and by 2050 there could be almost 30 million Indian Catholics. It's an inspiring social as well as spiritual triumph; some 60 to 75 percent of Indian Catholics are either from rural tribes or the 'untouchable' caste, and both groups experience the faith as a liberating force from oppression. All of that, however, could be at risk if India can't resolve its cultural and religious tensions. American Catholics may be in a special position to help, given that improving relations with India has been one of the few foreign policy success stories of the Bush administration.

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