

Vignettes from Rome

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 24, 2009 All Things Catholic

A possible pope, malaise in the Vatican, and you can't please everyone

For anyone interested in Catholic life, certain weeks in Rome are akin to what it must feel like to be a film buff at Cannes or Sundance -- there's so much going on, you hardly know where to start. This was one of those weeks, so instead of a unified narrative, I'll offer a few vignettes from the Eternal City.

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Forecasting papal elections is notoriously hazardous, but one thing almost everyone can agree on is that the supply of up-and-coming prelates who obviously have the right stuff is limited. These are figures, whatever one makes of their positions on issues, who indisputably possess deep intelligence, a broad sense of the world, and leadership ability. Needless to say, they don't grow on trees.

One such personality on the Roman scene is Italian Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, which is why I make it a point to show up whenever he's on stage. On Wednesday, Ravasi dropped by the Vatican Press Office to promote a science festival in Owerri, Nigeria, sponsored by the Council for Culture.

Ravasi spoke briefly about the relationship between science and faith, calling it "one of the most delicate and difficult, but also most exhilarating" challenges facing the church. In a vintage flash of erudition, he threw in a brief reflection on St. Anselm, the 11th century Benedictine doctor of the church and "father of scholasticism."

Given the festival's setting in Nigeria, I asked Ravasi if he thinks Africa might have something special to contribute to the reflection on science and faith, since its outlook has not been shaped by the same history as the West.

"I'd like to thank you for the question," he replied, "because I've put the same question to myself many times, but no one else has ever asked it." He said he would pose it not so much in terms of science and faith, but more broadly, science and "humanistic culture."

Ravasi said he's often been struck that when Westerners arrive in other places to promote projects, they can come off as "Eurocentric, a bit colonial," in the sense that they tend to work out of their intellectual models, "forgetting that these continents have their own long cultural quest, expressed along paths very different from our own."

For example, Ravasi said he's recently been reading up on Bantu metaphysics, and was "impressed with its originality. It's expressed largely in symbolic instruments," he said, "but it has great depth." He added that he's also interested in how Asia approaches science, given that it has a highly developed technical capacity -- India, for example, produces a disproportionate share of the world's software engineers -- but also a "different vision of the world," which is "culturally glorious." (It's not that India is without its problems, he cautioned, citing the treatment of the Dalits, or untouchables. Nonetheless, Ravasi said, there is much to learn.)

For my money, any prelate capable of citing both St. Anselm and Bantu metaphysics in the same train of thought is worth at least a look.

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You'd have to be comatose not to realize that the early months of 2009 have been turbulent for the Vatican. Since New Year's, Rome has seen the Holocaust-denying bishop controversy, the hastily withdrawn appointment of an auxiliary bishop in Austria who called Hurricane Katrina an act of divine vengeance, an acknowledgment that the founder of the Legionaries of Christ fathered a child out of wedlock, and a fracas over condoms which produced an extraordinary backlash in Europe, including an official protest from the Belgian parliament.

Fr. Anthony Figueiredo, a British-born priest of the Newark archdiocese who works in Cor Unum, the Vatican's charitable arm, candidly acknowledged the tumult all this has caused in an informal talk this week.

"There's been a certain malaise in the Vatican," Figueiredo conceded Monday. "These events have caused consternation."

As Figueiredo noted, the pope himself has acknowledged that some of the criticism these episodes generated has been justified. In a poignant letter to the bishops of the world after the Holocaust-denying bishop affair, for example, Benedict XVI said the Vatican needs to be savvier about the Internet. (Laughingly, Figueiredo said "we were very happy" with that, because afterwards "we were given permission to use the Internet in Vatican offices.")

Figueiredo was speaking to a group of American priests visiting Rome as part of Seton Hall University's International Institute for Clergy Formation. Msgr. James Choma, the institute's director, was kind enough to invite me to join the group for a couple of events.

By now, Figueiredo said, the furor "has begun to die down." As it does, Figueiredo said he hopes that the real core of Benedict's papacy can come into view. He called the papacy "surprising," in the sense that Benedict's positive tone and focus on the pastoral essentials has upended expectations of a stern, authoritarian figure. He also called Benedict "one of the greatest of all teaching popes."

Figueiredo outlined what he sees as four key elements of Benedict's message, all intended to "reopen the road to God" for modern women and men, and all remarkable both in their simplicity and fundamentally positive thrust:

? Friendship with Christ

? Prayer

? Love

? Hope

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Benedict XVI's visit to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories May 8-15 is likely to offer an object lesson in the ancient wisdom that "you can't please everyone." Several behind-the-scenes tensions currently percolating illustrate the point.

A Vatican official told me this week that e-mails have arrived in Rome complaining that the pope has not put the Gaza Strip on his itinerary, as a gesture of solidarity with people suffering from the recent conflict. Vatican diplomats point out that popes generally steer clear of such hot spots, on the grounds of not making an already

volatile situation worse. Moreover, even if the pope were inclined to act as a human shield, the question would be why he picks one conflict over another. (If he went to Gaza, critics might wonder why he didn't stop in Darfur during his recent trip to Africa.) Despite that, it's possible that some may read the fact the pope is not going to Gaza as a deliberate omission, as a missed opportunity, or worse.

Second, there's a difference among Palestinian Christians, and their supporters and émigré communities abroad, concerning how much the pope should say about the "exodus" of Christians out of the Holy Land. Some want the pope to hit the theme hard, both as a reflection of the reality (Jordanian Catholic Rateb Rabie, who runs the Holy Land Ecumenical Foundation in the Washington, D.C., area, told me there are just 50,000 Christians left in the Palestinian Territories, compared to 700,000 living abroad) and as a way of pressuring all parties to make peace. Others, however, worry that too much hand-wringing about an "exodus" may demoralize the Christians who are still in the Holy Land, and render the Christian presence in the region's societies even more invisible.

As an example of the latter view, I spoke by phone on April 18 with Fr. Rif'at Bader, a Jordanian priest of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, who's handling communications for the papal visit.

"We don't like to talk about the numbers, but about presence," Bader told me. "Christians are still present, they're well-educated, and they have an important role in the economy, in political life, in the academy . . . Too much focus on the numbers is dangerous, because it's depressing."

In still other quarters, there's ambivalence about the very idea of the trip, based on concern about its impact on efforts to negotiate a deal with Israel on the legal and tax status of church properties -- something that was supposed to be settled in 1994, after Israel and the Holy See launched diplomatic relations, but which is still unresolved 15 years later. Here's a concrete example: In Caesarea, a Catholic shrine was destroyed in the 1950s, and today local Catholics want the site returned so they can rebuild a place of worship. There are also concerns about visas for Christian clergy, especially since the new Israeli government of Binyamin Netanyahu has entrusted the Interior Ministry to the religious Shas Party. (The last time a Shas member controlled the ministry, there was a complete embargo on entry and residence permits for church personnel.)

Prior to this spring, the Vatican line appeared to be that there would be no papal visit to Israel until a deal on such matters was reached. The Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, said in December 2007 that "along with general conditions of peace, there should be positive signs on relations with the Holy See."

Some fear that having secured a papal visit, the Israelis may feel less pressure to strike a bargain. On the other hand, a senior Vatican official told me Wednesday that if the trip were conditional on resolving all outstanding disputes, it might never happen -- and for a pope who's now 82, as this official put it, you can't tell him, "Give it three years and we'll see."

For perspective on this point, I went on Tuesday to the Villa Massimo, the Rome headquarters of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, to speak with Fr. David Jaeger, the custodian's delegate. Born to Jewish parents in Tel Aviv, Jaeger converted to Christianity and became a Franciscan priest. He's long been a lead negotiator for the Vatican in its talks with the Israeli government.

"I trust that the Holy Father's visit will serve to confirm the centrality of the treaty-based relationship in Israel," Jaeger said, adding that this is a relationship involving "the Holy See, the worldwide Catholic church and the Jewish state."

In the context described above, the significance of the phrase "treaty-based" should be obvious.

Finally, there's anxiety among some local Catholics that the pope's itinerary is a bit too "politically correct," top-heavy with diplomatic, inter-faith and ecumenical events, potentially at the expense of the local church. For

example, Benedict is not scheduled to visit any Christian sites in Galilee, and he is also not planning to say Mass at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, restricting himself to a visit and speech. (John Paul II celebrated Mass in the Holy Sepulchre during his March 2000 visit.) Given the fierce jostling among different Christian denominations over claims to the Holy Sepulchre, some may be tempted to read Benedict's decision as a concession.

Like John Paul before him, Benedict will also visit a site associated with John's baptism of Jesus which lies on the Jordanian side of the Jordan River, and which is promoted as a tourist destination by the Jordanian government. Yet there's also a rival site on the Israeli side where Christian churches have been attracting pilgrims for centuries, but where access is now complicated by Israeli military zones. A papal visit to these traditional sites, some local Catholics believe, could be of enormous help. In part, the concerns are economic: whichever site the pope visits may get a leg up in the scramble to attract tourists.

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Another possible irritant on the trip could be fallout from the April 20-24 Durban Review Conference, the U.N.-sponsored World Conference Against Racism. Based on concerns that the conference was biased against Israel, a number of countries, including the United States, either boycotted or sent only low-level delegations. Those worries seemed confirmed when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad referred to Israel as "totally racist" and accused the Israelis of carrying out "ethnic cleansing in Gaza."

The Holy See took part in the conference, but Vatican officials have been engaged in a full-court PR press this week to ensure that Israel doesn't take it the wrong way.

On Monday, the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, issued a statement obviously intended to distance the Vatican from Ahmadinejad and his anti-Israeli line.

"In itself, the conference is an important occasion for carrying forward the struggle against racism and intolerance. The Holy See took part for this reason, and intends to support the efforts of international institutions to take steps forward in this direction," Lombardi said. "Naturally, statements such as that of the Iranian president do not move in the right direction, because, even if he did not deny the Holocaust or the right of Israel to exist, he used expressions which are extremist and unacceptable. For this reason, it's important to continue to clearly affirm respect for the dignity of the human person against every form of racism and intolerance."

On Wednesday, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, headlined a story on Durban, "The Holy See deplores the use of the forum for taking extremist positions offensive to any state."

In an interview on Thursday with *Corriere della Sera*, the Holy See's Permanent Observer to the United Nations, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, said that had Ahmadinejad repeated past comments questioning the Holocaust during his speech in Geneva, "We too would have made a different decision."

"We're very careful to assess the situation, especially because the pope is going to Israel as a sign of great affection toward the country," Tomasi said, adding that he had taken part in a Holocaust commemoration ceremony this week in Geneva.

Nonetheless, for Israelis suspicious of a pro-Palestinian bias in the Vatican, a photograph out of Benedict XVI's General Audience on Wednesday probably won't help. At the end of the audience, the pope stopped to chat briefly with a group of young Palestinian Christians from Bethlehem, representing a parish the pope plans to visit. One young woman put a keffiyeh, the classic Palestinian headdress, around the pope's shoulders. Fairly quickly, the pope's private secretary, Msgr. Georg Gänswein, removed it -- but the keffiyeh was on Benedict long enough for a photographer to get the shot. One imagines it will make the rounds.

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Most commentary on the fourth anniversary of Benedict's papacy has been intra-Catholic. This week, however, theologians from the Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox, Pentecostal and Reformed traditions (with a Catholic thrown in for good measure) came to Rome to present a new book titled *The Pontificate of Benedict XVI: Its Premises and Promises* (Eerdmans). Editor William Rusch, an American Lutheran, presented the pope with a copy of the book, bearing the signatures of each of its contributors.

The Centro Pro Unione, a prestigious ecumenical center in Rome run by the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, hosted a three-day conference this week to discuss the book. I was asked to be part of a concluding panel Tuesday morning, moderated by Msgr. John Radano of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

For a pope who hasn't always played to the best reviews ecumenically, the overall tone of the book is remarkably appreciative. German Lutheran Harding Mayer, for example, writes that "Of all the conservatives in the church, he is the one with the greatest capacity for dialogue." American Pentecostal Cheryl Bridges Johns says, "I have come to believe that while Benedict XVI seeks to conserve doctrine and to make clear the ecumenical boundaries, he is not of the temperament to stir up religious wars or to denigrate other Christians."

Such was the spirit of kinship that Rusch even came to Benedict's defense during a Q&A session. On the subject of relations between Benedict and his former colleague, liberal Swiss theologian Hans Küng, Rusch said that after reading Küng's memoirs, which contained some fairly biting remarks about the pope, "I'm not sure I would have invited him to pranzo if he had said those things about me."

Naturally, this is not to suggest that all is sweetness and light. Mayer, for example, suggested that Joseph Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, had backtracked on his appreciation for diversity in the churches as a result of a "personal drama" he suffered amid student uprisings in the 1960s. Nonetheless, the basic thrust of the authors was summed up by Rusch, who said they want the volume to represent an "encouragement" to the pope.

Just to offer a bit of the book's flavor, Jones observes in her essay that the demographic balance in Christianity is increasingly shifting to the global South, where the two main Christian groups are Catholics and Pentecostals. She suggests that "a reformed Catholicism and a mature Pentecostalism" may hold the key to the Christian future, and urges more conversation between the two.

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The Seton Hall contingent was just one of several American groups making the rounds this week. The Catholic Health Association is sponsoring an annual week in Rome for leaders of American health care systems, a program which includes visits to several Vatican offices. Representatives from the Leadership Conference for Women Religious (LCWR) and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), the main umbrella groups for women's and men's religious orders in the States, also met Vatican officials.

I spoke to the Catholic Health Association group Wednesday afternoon, offering a sort of "Vatican 101" overview in preparation for their meetings the next day.

Perhaps no group arrived in Rome with more on the line than the LCWR. Religious women in the United States were already facing a Vatican-ordered apostolic visitation, designed to assess their "quality of life," which is supervised by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Recently, however, the LCWR learned that it's also the object of a separate doctrinal inquiry, mandated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, based on concerns about speakers invited to address their annual

assemblies.

On Wednesday, LCWR and CMSM officers met with officials in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. I've done a story on the background to the doctrinal assessment, which can be found here: [Women religious meet Vatican accusers in Rome](#) [1]

On Thursday, the Catholic Health Association presented an award to Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sharon Holland, who has worked at the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life since 1988. Aside from being an accomplished canon lawyer and a trailblazer for women in the Vatican, Holland is also a legend in religious life. She's long been seen as the best friend religious orders have in Rome, an expert in helping them navigate the shoals of the Holy See.

Holland is preparing to step down, so the CHA recognition amounts to a "lifetime achievement award" for her Vatican career.

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Benedict XVI made an important personnel move on April 18, appointing Bishop Zygmunt Zimowski of Radom, Poland, to succeed Mexican Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán as president of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Health Care Workers. Zimowski was made an archbishop, and the job puts him in line to become a cardinal whenever the next consistory occurs.

Zimowski, who turned 60 on April 7, is a longtime confidante of the pope, having worked under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1983 to 2002. His appointment brings to four the number of Vatican offices now led by former Ratzinger aides. (Earlier this week I jokingly suggested they might be called the pope's ["Holy Office homeboys"](#) [2].)

While Zimowski is not yet a household name, one American prelate believes he'll get there: Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wis., who befriended Zimowski in the late 1980s, when Morlino was in Rome for studies.

I spoke to Morlino by phone on Monday.

Born in Scranton, Pa., to an Italian father and Polish mother, Morlino had long heard about his mother's oldest sister, who lived in rural Poland but was cut off from the family during the Communist era. Morlino was determined to find her while he was in Europe, and reached out to a couple of Polish priests. Zimowski helped Morlino track down his aunt, and the two men became friends. They've stayed in touch; in 2007, Morlino visited Zimowski in his diocese of Radom.

"He's a wonderful man," Morlino said. "He's very happy, holy, prayerful, he works hard, and he's a brilliant theologian. He had serious responsibilities in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which he carried out with great élan."

Morlino also said Zimowski has a "welcoming, kind personality" which should allow him to "easily forge relationships in dealing with Catholic hospitals and health care systems around the world." He said Zimowski speaks Italian and German fluently in addition to Polish, and that his English is "quite good," forged in part by several visits to the United States.

Given that Zimowski will likely become a cardinal, at least theoretically he could figure in conversations down the line about potential popes. So, I popped the question to Morlino: could he see his old friend as pope some day?

"Yes. That's easy: Yes," he replied. "Of course, I'm not sure what the cardinals might think about the idea of another Polish pope, but he's certainly got the qualifications to be papabile. He has all the gifts."

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The Pontifical Biblical Commission, an advisory body to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, met this week to discuss "inspiration and truth in the Bible." The topic arose during the most recent Synod of Bishops, devoted to scripture, where the main thrust seemed to be a desire to steer a middle course between two extremes: agnostic skepticism, meaning reading the Bible like any other piece of ancient literature; and Biblical fundamentalism.

Skepticism tends to strike Catholics from the West as the main concern, especially in Europe, while Catholics from the global South, especially Africa and Latin America, often feel more pressed by fundamentalism -- especially in the form of rapidly mushrooming Pentecostal movements, who often promote a literalistic reading of the Bible with heavy emphasis on the miraculous.

Pope Benedict XVI received the members of the commission on Thursday, saying that their topic is "a concern that's particularly close to my heart." The pope offered three keys for correct interpretation of the Bible:

- ? The unity of scripture, meaning reading each individual element in light of the whole;
- ? Reading scripture in the context of the living tradition of the church;
- ? The "analogy of faith," meaning understanding individual truths of the faith in the context of all the others and the entire scheme of revelation.

Members of the commission are appointed for five-year terms, and this week's session is the first time they've met to discuss the theme of inspiration. As a result, it's likely that a document won't appear for several years, perhaps near the end of this five-year mandate. For now, members are trying to develop a working outline, and then assignments for drafts of various portions will be made.

One theme that may emerge in the document is the self-consciousness of scripture itself, meaning the extent to which individual passages and books seem conscious of being part of a larger canon, and the extent to which they also seem aware of being inspired. As a document of the Biblical commission, it likely won't attempt to settle all the theological questions surrounding inspiration, but rather focus on the witness of scripture itself. In general, the determination seems to be to insist that all of scripture is inspired and therefore true, but sometimes in a sense different than what is meant by literalists.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission has 20 members from various parts of the world. American Cardinal William Levada, as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is its president. Also from the United States is Passionist Fr. Donald Senior, a past president of the Catholic Biblical Association and currently president of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

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Pope Benedict will make a brief trip on Tuesday to the Abruzzo region of Italy, where a magnitude 6.3 earthquake on April 6 left at least 294 people dead and thousands living in what amount to tent cities. The pope will visit one of the tent cities, meet with students and with relief workers, and leave behind a papal pallium as a tribute at the Basilica of Santa Maria di Collemaggio, which houses the remains of the 13th century Pope Celestine V. L'Aquila was the epicenter of the quake.

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