

Mahony on ministry; headaches in the Holy Land

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 30, 2009 All Things Catholic

Few American bishops have pondered the future of ministry in the Catholic church as thoroughly as Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles. He issued a pastoral letter on the subject in 2000 called "As I Have Done For You," presided over an archdiocesan synod in which ministry was a major focus, and sponsored three subsequent documents on leadership by the ordained and non-ordained, the role of a lay administrator in a priestless parish, and parish-based evangelization.

Mahony has a profile as something of a liberal, so some of his ideas may not be everyone's cup of tea. Nonetheless, he's produced a body of reflection on ministry that few specialized theologians can rival, to say nothing of bishops perpetually pulled in a thousand directions.

Now 73, Mahony spoke on ministry this week to a National Federation of Priests' Councils convention in San Antonio. At one point he sketched 17 specific challenges facing the church, saying his aim was not to present definitive positions but to foster discussion. Whatever conclusions one may reach, the questions offer a roadmap to the terrain.

The following summary is based on excerpts from Mahony's San Antonio address.

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Challenges cited by the cardinal include:

1. "Some really harsh generational divides" among priests, "with the younger generation often quite openly challenging the orthodoxy of older priests."
2. A need for "welcome and hospitality" in parishes. (Mahony offered a practical example: "On several occasions I have called parish offices and got entangled in the web of voicemail menu choices, trying to extract myself from the non-stop options without ever being able to speak to a real, live person.")
3. In light of the priest shortage, deacons are increasingly being formed to administer priestless parishes. Does that risk "undermining the integrity of the diaconate as a ministry distinct from the ministerial priesthood?"
4. Offering "proper theological and pastoral formation" for lay ministers, at a time when the economy is prompting greater reliance on volunteers and deacons.
5. How to foster a strong identity among young priests, without making them "less collaborative, less flexible," and more inclined to throw their weight around. (Mahony appended what he said is a true story: "One of our seminary professors asked a first year seminarian: Why have you asked your bishop to transfer you to another seminary? Answer: Because the priests, sisters and professors at Saint John's Seminary want to give the church to the laity!")

6. Taking a "hard look" at the changing face of seminarians in terms of age, culture, and language. ("Do we realize," Mahony asked, "that some of our seminarians from diverse cultures have little or no interest in what many of us think of as "multiculturalism"?)")
7. "Too many liturgies and homilies are not what they might be, often because of a lack of a good grasp of Scripture as the basis for homilies and for liturgy planning."
8. "A slowing down of ecumenical efforts at the local level, and at all levels."
9. A "weakening" of social concern among parishioners, driven in some cases by moral and political disagreement. (Mahony cited an example: "The church's current efforts at comprehensive immigration reform have often been met with outright denunciation as the anti-immigrant mood takes deeper root.")
10. Threats to parish unity from "the re-introduction of the Latin Mass and more "sacred" liturgies, which have the effect of creating two parallel communities."
11. How to articulate the church's positions on sexuality "in a plausible and compelling way."
12. "More parish retreats, to give people an inexpensive and parish-related quiet time."
13. A "poorly realized renewal of reconciliation ministry within parishes -- especially the Sacrament of Reconciliation."
14. Training laity to provide spiritual direction, "as part of a larger spiritual renewal ministry in the parish."
15. "The nagging problem of too many people getting children baptized, and getting married, outside their own parish."
16. "Not enough attention to a communal approach to the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, as an integral part of a community's care for the sick."
17. Greater interaction among all the parishes in a diocese, especially "where there are many social classes and many cultural groups."

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Given the atrocious PR run Benedict XVI has suffered of late, it's probably par for the course that he turned in one of his best public performances of the year this week, and, at least outside Italy, almost no one was paying attention. With the economy and swine flu dominating global headlines, Benedict's three-hour visit on Tuesday to Abruzzo, the epicenter of an April 6 Italian earthquake that left almost 300 dead and 50,000 homeless, drew relatively scant international interest.

Those who were watching, however, saw Benedict deliver some sleeves-rolled-up, retail-level pastoral care, and his instincts seemed almost pitch-perfect.

Given the highly scripted nature of most papal activity, perhaps the day's most striking feature was that the bulk of Benedict's time was devoted to impromptu one-on-one encounters with survivors, family members, rescue workers, and local clergy. He delivered just two brief speeches, and didn't even celebrate a liturgy (save for reciting the Regina Coeli at the end of the morning.)

At a large tent city in Onna, a small town almost completely wiped out by the quake, Benedict consoled a

couple who lost all their children, as well as a local journalist whose father and two young children died when their house collapsed. The day's most vivid images were of the pope holding the hands of survivors, embracing them, smiling and wiping their tears, and listening to their stories.

"If it were possible, I would have liked to go to every town and to every neighborhood, to go into all the tent cities and to meet everyone," the pope said, and it seemed that he meant it.

Benedict had been scheduled to take a helicopter from Rome to Abruzzo, but a driving rain prevented it from lifting off, so the pope went by car instead. Temperatures hovered around freezing for most of the morning, but he never seemed in a rush to move on.

The day's stagecraft also seemed designed to promote intimacy. When the pope arrived in L'Aquila, a city of 100,000 which houses the famed medieval Basilica of Collemaggio, he made several turns through the crowd in a large piazza while standing in the back of an open-air jeep. The scene evoked memories of a simpler era, as this is how the late Pope John Paul II used to greet pilgrims in St. Peter's Square before the 1981 assassination attempt forced the Vatican to adopt the more secure popemobile.

Benedict offered a few brief words of consolation, without attempting a facile "explanation" of the tragedy.

"The entire church is here with me, standing with you in your suffering," the pope told the victims, adding that The Lord "is not deaf to the anguished cry of so many families who have lost everything."

Yet the pope did not restrict himself to pieties, also calling for "effective solutions, as soon as possible, for those who are living in tents," drawing sustained applause. He also urged "a serious examination of conscience" from civic authorities, another line that generated strong applause, given that poor building standards and construction materials are widely believed to have contributed to the quake's toll. A local prosecutor has opened an investigation that could lead to criminal charges, and an official with Italy's Civil Protection agency said that "in California, an earthquake like this would not have killed a single person."

The sharp comments from the pope formed the main headlines in most Italian papers, and seemed to articulate the country's sentiments.

Of course, Benedict's bravura performance arguably would have captured the world's imagination to a far greater extent had he made his way to Abruzzo sooner. If he had come to celebrate the funeral Mass on April 10, for example, the visit would have fallen on Good Friday, making it irresistible for many media outlets.

But at least on this day, no matter how comparatively small the stage, Benedict XVI seemed at the top of his craft.

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I've written for the last couple of weeks about the multiple balancing acts Benedict will have to perform on his May 8-15 visit to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Reminders keep rolling in of the headaches awaiting the pope.

Consider:

- Followers of Sheikh Nazem Abu Salim, a fiery Muslim preacher in Nazareth, have put up a large banner, right next to the famed Church of the Annunciation, condemning those who insult Muhammad -- an obvious reference to Benedict XVI's 2006 speech in Regensburg, in which he cited a Byzantine emperor

- with nasty things to say about the founder of Islam. (In a verse lifted from the Qur'an, the banner reads: 'Those who harm G-d and His Messenger -- G-d has cursed them in this world and in the hereafter, and has prepared for them a humiliating punishment.')
- Given that Benedict XVI is scheduled to be in Nazareth on May 14, the anniversary of the declaration of the State of Israel, and that he's planning to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that day, the situation seems particularly combustible. An Israeli newspaper reported this week that Shin Bet, Israel's security service, has counseled Benedict against using the partially exposed popemobile in Nazareth out of concern for potential threats.
- In Jordan, members of the Muslim Brotherhood have demanded a public apology from the pope for his Regensburg speech; otherwise, they've threatened to stage protests while the pope is in Amman. The Vatican's position is that such an apology has already been delivered, and more than once.
 - A petition on the Internet asking Benedict XVI to visit the Gaza Strip while he's in the Holy Land has collected around 3,000 signatures, including several dozen Catholic priests, sisters, and brothers. (A couple members of the Community of Sant'Egidio initiated the petition, albeit on their own initiative. It can be found here: <http://www.petitiononline.com/popegaza/petition.html>). Privately, Vatican officials say that a visit to Gaza has not been seriously considered -- in part for reasons of security, and in part because it would likely become an occasion for anti-Israeli agitprop. The pope will address the situation in Gaza, they say, while he's in the region.
 - Israeli and Palestinian officials are squabbling over the location of the stage for Benedict's visit to the Aida refugee camp near Bethlehem on May 13. Palestinians want to put the stage immediately next to a large concrete wall that's part of Israel's security barrier in the West Bank, while the Israelis want it somewhere else. Ostensibly it's a dispute over permits and logistics, but the obvious political subtext is that the Palestinians want to make a statement about what they see as an illegitimate Israeli occupation. In the end, it may not matter, since locals say there's no point in the camp from which the wall isn't visible. (One coincidence worth recalling: Benedict XVI will be in Bethlehem on May 13, which is not only the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, but also the anniversary of the 1981 assassination attempt against John Paul II.)
 - A Jewish anti-missionary organization in Israel called Yad L'Achim has called on Benedict XVI to use his trip to appeal to Catholics worldwide for help in identifying Jewish children saved from the Nazis by being placed in Catholic homes, who were never told of their Jewish origins. The group issued an open letter to Benedict, charging that the families withheld this information on instructions from Pius XII, the wartime pontiff whose alleged 'silence' during the Holocaust has long been a source of friction in Jewish/Catholic relations.
 - On Thursday, municipal officials in Jerusalem ordered the demolition of a two-story addition to a monastery and church owned by the Armenian Catholic church in the Old City. The addition had been built, church officials said, to house Vatican dignitaries visiting Jerusalem. Some local Christian leaders charged that the demolition order is part of an Israeli effort to wipe out the Christian presence in the Old City, thereby 'Judaizing' the area, and vowed to raise the issue with the pope.
 - Last week, Israel's Tourism Minister, Stas Misezhnikov, publicly demanded that Benedict XVI not meet the mayor of Skahnin, a large Arab town inside Israel, at the end of his General Audience in Rome on April 29. The mayor, Mazen Ghanaim, had planned to greet the pope, but Misezhnikov accused him of supporting terrorism, insisting that any acknowledgement from the pope would be 'in complete contradiction' with the spirit of his visit. Arab leaders reacted angrily, charging that Misezhnikov's comments are part of a racist campaign to paint Arabs in the country as fifth columnists. In the end, Ghanaim was notified that his tickets for the audience had been withdrawn.

Yet all is not heartburn in the run-up to the trip.

This week brought a story out of Bethlehem, for example, about a Muslim calligrapher named Yasser Abu Saymeh who was commissioned by the city's mayor to prepare a copy of the Gospel of Luke for the pope in traditional Arabic script. While Abu Saymeh said he'd never before read the New Testament, he was struck by

what the two faiths have in common, and said he comes out of the experience with a new commitment to "brotherly relations" between Christians and Muslims.

Meanwhile, more than 100 rabbis, representing all the major branches of Judaism, are planning to take out an ad in *Ha'Aretz*, the oldest and most influential paper in Israel, welcoming the pope and expressing support for his "mission of peace." The ad features a quote from *Nostra Aetate*, the document of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) on other religions, and directs readers to a web site where they can learn about what the rabbis call a "transformation" in Jewish-Catholic relations since Vatican II. The idea for the ad came from American Rabbi Jack Bemporad, a Holocaust refugee from Italy and founder of the Center for Interreligious Understanding in New Jersey.

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Source URL (retrieved on 07/26/2017 - 12:03): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/mahony-ministry-headaches-holy-land>