

A gut check for American Catholicism

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 17, 2009 All Things Catholic

Also: A good run for Vatican PR, Obama's Catholic roots and the 'economy of communion'

A broken wrist notwithstanding, Pope Benedict XVI is relaxing in Valle d'Aosta in northern Italy from July 13 to July 29, winding down after the exertions not only of the past year, but just the week before his vacation began. In fact, when the definitive history of Benedict XVI's papacy is written, the first week of July 2009 might well deserve a chapter all by itself.

Twice in that short span, Benedict propelled himself into the thick of global debate by offering his slant on two of the hottest topics on the planet today: the economic crisis and Barack Obama.

Both the pontiff's long-awaited social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, and his July 10 tête-à-tête with the American president, generated an avalanche of comment and analysis. (My own coverage can be found in both the on-line and print editions of *NCR*). Rather than rehash the details here, I'm going to try to answer just one question: Did we see or hear anything that poses a direct challenge to the American Catholic church?

I think the answer is "yes," and the fact that it hasn't quite registered yet tells us something important about where things stand.

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During the July 7 Vatican press conference to present *Caritas in Veritate*, it fell to Archbishop Giampaolo Crepaldi of Trieste, Italy, former secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, to say whether the document contained anything new. In truth, there wasn't much. Most of its economic and political analysis recapitulated points already made many times in social encyclicals, beginning with Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891.

(The astonishment unleashed by Benedict's rejection of laissez faire capitalism, or his call for a "true world political authority," thus goes to show that Catholic social teaching may indeed be the church's "best-kept secret." Nobody familiar with it should have been surprised.)

Crepaldi did point to one original aspect of *Caritas in Veritate*: Benedict's insistence on holding anthropology and sociology together -- or, to put it differently, his insistence on treating the pro-life message of the Catholic church and its peace-and-justice concerns as a package deal. This is the first papal social encyclical to so thoroughly blend economic justice with the defense of human life from conception to natural death.

"These indications of *Caritas in Veritate* don't have value merely as exhortations," Crepaldi said. "They invite a new way of thinking, and a new praxis, that takes account of the systematic interconnections between the anthropological themes linked to life and human dignity, and the economic, social and cultural themes linked to development."

Benedict XVI's handling of his predecessor, Pope Paul VI, reinforced the point.

Impressions of Paul VI have long been "exhibit A" for the phenomenon of cafeteria Catholicism. Conservatives tend to hail Pope Paul's birth control encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, as an act of courage in the teeth of tremendous pressure, but regard his other social teaching -- especially the 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* -- as an embarrassing concession to the radical political currents of the late 1960s. For liberals, it's precisely the opposite. *Populorum Progressio* stands as a high-water mark of progressive papal thought, but *Humanae Vitae* looms as a critical failure of nerve by the "Hamlet pope."

In *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict not only defends both encyclicals, but argues that one can't be understood without the other. He hails *Populorum Progressio* as "the *Rerum Novarum* of the present age," and says that reading it in tandem with *Humanae Vitae* underscores "the strong links between life ethics and social ethics."

Of course, the idea that defending unborn life and defending the poor go together is not terribly revolutionary at the level of principle. It's been repeated so often in official Catholic literature that there are probably T-shirts someplace emblazoned with that mantra.

Statements of principle, however, often fail to account for the gap between what we say and what we do. In that sense, *Caritas in Veritate* amounts to a direct challenge to the sociology of American Catholicism.

Both at the grass roots and among the chattering classes, the American church is often described as split between its pro-lifers and its peace-and-justice contingent. More accurately, it's divided between those who see Catholic teaching as a useful tool to support their partisan preferences, whatever they may be, and those for whom the faith comes first and secular politics second.

Put differently, the real "losers" from *Caritas in Veritate* are Catholics who operate as chaplains to political parties, cheerleaders for political candidates, and spin doctors for either the Bush or Obama administrations, cherry-picking among church teachings to support those positions. Needless to say, the American Catholic landscape is dotted with prominent examples of all the above.

Recent years have seen some noble attempts to put Humpty-Dumpty back together again. When the U.S. bishops produced their most recent version of "Faithful Citizenship," a statement on faith and politics, they styled it as a joint project of their pro-life and peace-and-justice committees. At the time, it seemed a tribute to a unified Catholic vision, though some of that synthesis seemed to unravel under the pressures of the '08 campaign. A second example is the annual Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, again under the aegis of the U.S. bishops, which has become a laboratory for a consistent life ethic. It's sponsored by both the conference's pro-life and social mission structures.

Yet such efforts remain rare. Under the lure of partisan politics, pro-life and peace-and-justice Catholics in America too often move in separate circles. They read their own journals and Web sites, go to their own meetings, and have their own heroes. Pro-lifers tend to be drawn into the Republican orbit, while peace-and-justice types are usually more comfortable with the Democrats. As a result, they travel down separate paths, having separate conversations and investing their time and treasure in distinct, and sometimes even opposing, efforts.

In turn, those patterns reflect deep currents in American sociology, which work against any effort to transcend divisions. Journalist Bill Bishop calls the accelerating tendency of Americans during the past 30 years to retreat into like-minded tribes, both physically and virtually, "the Big Sort," and says the results are obvious: "Balkanized communities whose inhabitants find other Americans to be culturally incomprehensible; a growing intolerance for political differences that has made national consensus impossible; and politics so polarized that

Congress is stymied and elections are no longer just contests over policies, but bitter choices over ways of life."

(As a footnote, if I had the authority to decree a reading assignment for every Catholic in America, it would be Bishop's 2008 book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*. His observations about broad trends in American society can be applied almost point-for-point to the internal life of the church.)

Thus the question implicitly posed by Benedict's encyclical: Can the church in this country develop a new way of "breathing with both lungs," bringing its pro-life and peace-and-justice energies into greater alignment? Or are we fated to continue the present pattern of "Big Sort Catholicism"?

Can American Catholics evangelize the country's politics, or are we content to be evangelized by it?

That, in any event, seems to be the gut-check posed by *Caritas in Veritate*.

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To say the least, the first half of 2009 was not exactly a banner period for the Vatican's communications operation. In the spirit of giving credit where it's due, however, it's only fair to point out that the Vatican lately has been on a PR roll.

The turnaround began with Pope Benedict's surprise announcement on June 28 that carbon-14 testing supports the tradition that the remains under the main altar of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls are indeed those of St. Paul. (To be precise, tests show that micro-fragments of material extracted from the sarcophagus in the basilica date to the first or second century; as a Vatican scientist put it, that result "doesn't make certain, but also doesn't exclude," that the remains are those of Paul.)

As the story unfolded, it became clear that the Vatican had been aware of these results for more than a year, but Benedict XVI wanted to save the announcement until the end of the "Pauline Year" he opened last June. The fact that the news didn't leak out, stealing Benedict's thunder, has to be rated as a minor PR miracle. In the end, the pope got the round of headlines he wanted, extending the buzz around Paul beyond the formal close of the year marking the 2,000th anniversary of his birth.

Next came the remarkably well-timed release of *Caritas in Veritate*. Benedict originally intended to publish the text in 2007, in order to mark the 40th anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*, but slowed things down in order to reflect on the global economic crisis. In theory, therefore, the encyclical could have appeared pretty much anytime.

By waiting until the eve of a much-anticipated G8 summit in Italy -- a summit called precisely to ponder reforms in the architecture of the global economy -- the Vatican got maximum bang for the buck. In part, that's because throngs of journalists in Italy, looking for a curtain-raiser story before the summit opened, seized upon the encyclical like manna from Heaven.

Naturally, the fact that the encyclical came out just three days before the meeting with Obama didn't hurt its news value either.

Then came the Obama meeting, and once again the communications dimension was handled artfully. On one small point, Benedict's symbolic touch even seemed to trump that of the always communications-savvy Obama.

An exchange of gifts is part of the ritual when popes meet heads of state, and in the carefully parsed language of international diplomacy, these choices can sometimes be meaningful. Obama presented Benedict with a stole

that had been draped around the body of St. John Neumann, a 19th century missionary and bishop in Philadelphia. Neumann was the first American bishop to be named a saint, making Obama's gift a bit ironic in light of the mixed reviews he's drawn from some of today's American bishops.

That choice might have raised more eyebrows if it hadn't been so clearly overshadowed by what Obama got in return. Earlier in the week, Benedict XVI had been handing out autographed copies of *Caritas in Veritate* to visiting dignitaries. For Obama, however, Benedict pointedly added a copy of another Vatican document -- *Dignitas Personae*, a treatise on bioethics, the opening sentence of which reads: "The dignity of a person must be recognized in every human being from conception to natural death."

More basically, by placing the life issues front and center, Benedict avoided any impression of undercutting the American bishops. By repeatedly praising Obama's openness, and putting a positive spin on his pledge to try to bring down the abortion rate, the Vatican still got credit for graciousness.

The Vatican also benefitted from the fact that the White House media operation had to depart the field, since Obama left Rome immediately for Ghana. As a result, the only public comment came from the Vatican side, with the papal spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, making himself available for a live briefing with reporters shortly after the meeting. That's not normal practice after the pope encounters a head of state, when the press is typically dependent upon a brief and anodyne written statement.

That meant the Vatican was in an unchallenged position to shape the story, and Lombardi seemed to have a clear strategy: No playing down the life issues, but styling Obama as a conversation partner rather than a cultural enemy. The result was more or less exactly the coverage that a communications consultant for the Holy See would have wanted.

To be sure, none of this necessarily means a new era of media savvy has dawned.

After Benedict's announcement about St. Paul, for example, it took almost a full week to arrange a briefing with the scientists who did the tests, spawning a predictable cycle of speculation and conspiracy theories in the interim. With *Caritas in Veritate*, an overflow crowd of reporters at the press conference was treated to two hours of listening to lengthy prepared statements, all in Italian, followed by a brief and largely unenlightening period of Q&A. During those rare occasions when the Vatican has the attention of the world's media -- on its own terms, and in a moment of its own choosing -- that's probably not the best way to exploit the opportunity.

Nonetheless, the last two weeks offered much to build upon in terms of envisioning a communications strategy better able to ensure that what the pope pitches is also what the world catches.

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While there are many ways to frame the July 10 meeting between Obama and Pope Benedict XVI, here's one that may not have occurred to many people other than the president himself: A former employee of the Catholic church dropping in on his old boss.

Obama's roots as a community organizer on the South Side of Chicago are the stuff of legend, but what's less well known is that much of this work was performed on the payroll of the Catholic church. The story is fleshed out in the booklet "[The Catholic Case for Obama,](#)" [1] written during the 2008 campaign by Patrick Whelan, founder of the group Catholic Democrats.

Whelan was in Rome both for the release of *Caritas in Veritate* and for the session between pope and president, meeting with Vatican personnel and reporters.

As Whelan tells it, the young Obama was hired by a community development project launched by a consortium of eight Catholic parishes in Chicago, and funded by the U.S. bishops' Catholic Campaign for Human Development. Obama worked out of an office in the rectory of Holy Rosary church. Though it takes some connecting of the dots to get there, one could therefore loosely say that Obama's ultimate employer during this time was the pope. (Back in the mid-1980s that was John Paul II, not Benedict XVI, but why let details get in the way of a good story?)

More proximately, of course, Obama's Catholic point of reference wasn't the pope so much as the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. Thus when Obama talks about his admiration for Bernardin, he's not speaking simply as a Chicago politician, but as someone who actually drew a pay-check because of the cardinal's social vision.

If Obama's savvy about church affairs sometimes seems surprising for a non-Catholic, this experience may help explain things. It also may help explain why Obama's Catholic critics worry, in the language of George Weigel, that the president may end up challenging the country's bishops for control over the Catholic "brand." Obama may not be Catholic, but he certainly knows the kind of Catholic he likes.

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One final bit of insider Catholic baseball from *Caritas in Veritate*.

I referred above to "losers" from the encyclical, but among the winners, a clear example would be Focolare, one of the new lay movements in Catholicism created during the 20th century. Focolare's "economy of communion" project, which claims to link roughly 750 firms worldwide in a more humanistic way of doing business, is the lone initiative singled out for praise by Pope Benedict XVI in the document.

(Oddly enough, Benedict XVI cites the "economy of communion" but doesn't explicitly mention Focolare, making the question of whether a reader automatically caught the reference perhaps the best recent test in papal literature of true "Catholic insider" status.)

The pope hailed the economy of communion as a promising form of intermediate activity between for-profit business and non-profit institutions, rupturing what he called an "exclusively binary model of market-plus-state" which is "corrosive of society."

Commonly reckoned to be among the largest and most influential of the new movements, Focolare was founded in 1943 by Italian Catholic laywoman Chiara Lubich, who died in 2008, to promote the ideals of unity and universal brotherhood. Today Focolare claims to be represented in 182 nations, reaching millions of people.

During a 1991 trip to Brazil, Lubich challenged Focolare members to launch businesses that could create jobs and opportunities for the impoverished city of Araceli. Various firms resulted, including a plastics manufacturing business, a clothing company, and a pig farm.

Building on that impulse, the Focolare movement developed what they describe as a new approach to business activity. Profits from "economy of communion" firms are pooled to fund development programs, charitable activities, and programs of formation and education in disadvantaged areas.

Today Focolare claims some 750 business around the world as part of the network, including 36 in North America. According to Focolare materials, the firms range from cottage industries to multi-million dollar enterprises.

Information on the "economy of communion" can be found here:

http://www.focolare.us/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=0&Itemid=75

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