

Benedict's ongoing battle against secularism

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 6, 2009 All Things Catholic

Much has been made lately of Pope Benedict XVI's apparent lenience for "cafeteria Catholicism" on the right. Two developments have fed the perception: talks between the Vatican and the Society of St. Pius X, the "Lefebvrites," who broke with Rome in protest of liberalizing currents after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65); and new structures to allow Anglicans to become Catholic while preserving their heritage, with the most likely takers being conservative Anglicans opposed to homosexuality and women's ordination.

Though it's not clear how many Lefebvrites or Anglicans will walk through the doors Rome has tried to open, the effect on both fronts will be to inject new pockets of traditionalist believers into the Catholic circulatory system.

What's the underlying logic for such moves? While it may at first blush seem unrelated, a controversial decision on Tuesday by the European Court of Human Rights, which held that displaying crucifixes in Italian public school classrooms violates freedom of conscience, can help provide some context.

In effect, Benedict's outreach to Lefebvrites and dissident Anglicans forms part of a trend I've described as "evangelical Catholicism." One cornerstone is to reassert markers of Catholic distinctiveness -- such as Mass in Latin, and traditional moral teaching -- as a means of ensuring that the church is not assimilated to secularism. At the policy-setting level of the church today, this defense of Catholic identity is job number one.

Historically, "evangelical Catholicism" is a creative impulse rather than something purely defensive, with roots in the papacy of Leo XIII in the late 19th century and his effort to bring a renewed Catholic tradition to bear on social and political life. Nevertheless, fear that secularism may erode the faith from within is also a powerful current propelling evangelical Catholicism forward.

To over-simplify a bit, Benedict XVI is opening the door to the Lefebvrites and to traditionalist Anglicans in part because whatever else they may be, they are among the Christians least prone to end up, in the memorable phrase of Jacques Maritain, "kneeling before the world," meaning sold out to secularism.

At this stage, some critics may be tempted to ask if the cure is perhaps worse than the disease -- in other words, if secularism is really so bad.

Benedict XVI himself has talked about a "healthy secularism," which involves the separation of church and state and recognition of the essentially lay character of politics. Evangelical Catholics such as the late Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger of Paris actually see this kind of secularism as a precondition for authentic faith, because it forces Christianity to be a personal choice, rather than something imbibed from religiously homogenous cultures where faith and practice are buttressed by the state.

"We're really at the dawn of Christianity," Lustiger used to say of the transition to a secular world.

Yet that's not the perception of secularism that tends to drive the ecclesiastical train these days, especially in

Europe. At senior levels of the church, there's a growing conviction that a tipping point has been reached -- that Western secularization is crossing the line from neutrality to outright hostility, toward religion in general and Catholicism in particular. Cardinal Renato Martino, the former President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, put things this way: "It looks like a new Inquisition. It is a lay Inquisition, but it is so nasty. You can freely insult and attack Catholics, and nobody will say anything."

All of which brings us back to the stunner this week from the European Court of Human Rights.

The court, based in Strasbourg, issued its ruling in response to a petition from an Italian woman named Soile Lautsi, who lives near Padua and who claimed that having crucifixes in the public school classrooms attended by her two children violates the church/state separation provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights. The court agreed, awarding Lautsi 5,000 euros (roughly \$7,400) in damages.

The court did not order Italian schools to remove the crucifixes, in part because under European law it had no authority to do so. Lautsi had tried and failed to press the issue in Italian courts, which rejected her claim on the basis that crucifixes are symbols of Italy's national identity.

The Vatican was predictably dismayed. Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, issued a statement greeting the ruling with "astonishment and sorrow." Lombardi decried the effort to "cast out of the educational world a fundamental sign of the importance of religious values in Italian history and culture."

It's tough not to regard the ruling as a way for European judges to grind an axe, since whatever else it may mean, it certainly does not augur the end of crucifixes in Italian classrooms. Italian authorities have said they will appeal, and politicians of the left, right and center tripped over one another denouncing the ruling. Polls have consistently showed overwhelming public support for leaving the crucifixes in place.

"No one, and certainly not an ideological European court, will succeed in erasing our identity," said Italian Education Minister Mariastella Gelmini, a member of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's center-right coalition.

Perhaps the lone indisputable result of Tuesday's ruling, therefore, is that it will cement impressions among many religious believers, and particularly among Catholics, that Europe's secular elites are determined to drive religion out of public life -- that the "nasty lay inquisition" to which Martino referred continues apace.

In that cultural milieu, one in which Catholic identity is perceived to be under assault -- and, given Tuesday's decision, it's hard to fault church leaders for drawing that conclusion -- it's no surprise that defense of Catholic identity has become an *idée fixe*. That includes efforts to welcome groups into the church who are ferociously committed to important markers of identity, such as traditional forms of liturgy and devotion and traditional moral teachings.

One may, of course, dispute the wisdom of Benedict's open-door policy for the Lefebvrites or disgruntled Anglicans. Yet to pretend that such moves are inexplicable apart from the personal predilections of a conservative pope is to ignore the social reality of contemporary Europe.

It's not paranoia, in other words, if they really are out to get you.

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I was in Spain this week, speaking at an international symposium organized by the Capuchins on the subject of "What Does Europe Believe In?" with the subtitle, "The Capuchins between Secularization and the Return of Religious Life."

(Regular readers know of my "preferential option" for the Capuchins, the order that educated and formed me all the way through high school and beyond. I went to Madrid largely to pay off that old debt -- though as I said, whether my connection with the Capuchins is to their credit, or their eternal shame, is a matter for others to judge!)

One point I tried to make is that while secularism is a real and present danger, there's an equal-and-opposite risk of becoming so bewitched by secularism that we misdiagnose reality. Especially in light of this week's ruling from the European Court of Human Rights, it may be worth reproducing here the relevant section from my lecture on Wednesday evening:

"Seen exclusively through a European prism, it could perhaps seem as if secularism is the chief, if not the only, pastoral and cultural challenge facing the faith. The truth, however, is that Europe is really the only zone of the world where secularism has an especially large sociological footprint. In the United States, there are influential pockets of secularism among our cultural elites -- in the faculty lounges of our universities, for example, and on our newspaper editorial boards -- but at the grassroots we remain an intensely religious society. Outside the West, one has to look long and hard to find real secularists."

"In most of the rest of the world, the primary pastoral challenge facing Catholicism isn't secularism but the competitive dynamics of a bustling religious marketplace. In Africa, Asia and Latin America, the main competitors to Catholicism are Christian Pentecostalism, or Islam, or revived forms of indigenous religion. As a result, to craft future strategies for Catholicism based largely on defending ourselves against secularization risks misreading the social situation. Most people in the world, most of the time, aren't seriously tempted by secular agnosticism, but rather by one or another option on the contemporary spiritual smorgasbord -- and that smorgasbord is, therefore, where at least some share of your energy and imagination ought to be directed, not just pondering secularism."

"Let me offer one practical implication. To the extent we define secularism as our main problem, Catholicism inevitably ends up looking defensive, forever building walls around a tradition we believe to be under assault. When the term of comparison is no longer secularism, however, but rather some forms of Pentecostalism or Islam, or quasi-magical currents in indigenous belief, that change of context positions Catholicism differently, as an alternative to religious movements that at times veer toward fundamentalism, extremism, or thaumaturgy. The capacity of Catholicism to integrate reason and faith, to uphold tradition while at the same time engaging modernity, emerges with greater clarity."

"In other words, given what's actually on offer in today's religious marketplace, Catholicism often seems a balanced, moderate, and sophisticated option. For the record, this is how most people on the planet right now actually see the Catholic church, in light of what else they see around them."

"That realization ought to have consequences not only for our missionary and pastoral strategies, but also for our own attitudes about the church."

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