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Rethinking an 'immigration gap' between European and U.S. bishops

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 1, 2010 NCR Today

tBob Dole once quipped that being Vice President of the United States is a great gig: ?It?s indoor work, and there?s no heavy lifting.? For journalists, predicting the future is much the same ? it sounds terribly smart, yet it requires no real effort because there?s no way to be wrong, at least at the time the prediction is made.

tLater on, however, the bills come due if your forecasts turn out to be off the mark. The only way to save face is to get ahead of the curve, before someone else calls attention to your mistakes. Hence one function of this blog is to acknowledge when things don?t seem to be developing in quite the way I suggested in *The Future Church*, and recent events in Italy suggest just such a case with regard to the Catholic Church and immigration.

tIn a nutshell, I opined that the future might see a growing divide between European and American bishops on immigration, with the Americans becoming staunchly pro-immigrant and the Europeans more cautious. The basic reason is that a disproportionate share of new immigrants to the United States are Hispanic, thus Catholic, while in Europe they tend to be from the Middle East and North Africa, hence Muslim.

tAt least in Italy, however, that doesn?t seem to be the way the winds are blowing. Instead, the Italian bishops have repeatedly taken on the government of conservative Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi over its tough line on immigration, most recently calling out Berlusconi after he publicly suggested a link between immigrants and crime.

tDuring a press conference this week, the secretary general of the Italian bishops? conference (CEI), Bishop Mariano Crociata, fired back.

t?Our statistics demonstrate that the percentage of criminality among Italians and foreigners is basically equal, if not identical,? Crociata said.

t?The dignity of every human person must not be the object of prejudice or discrimination, as the Pontiff recently recalled with regard to immigrants,? Crociata added, in a remark widely taken as a shot across the bow of the governing center-right coalition in view of looming regional elections in Italy. The bishops have advised Catholics to ponder their votes with an eye toward defending ?life, the family and solidarity.?

tA spokesperson for the Northern League, the far-right component of Berlusconi?s coalition, took offense: ?Data like that is furnished by the government, not the episcopal conference,? he said. ?The truth is that foreign residents are more delinquent than Italians.?

tFor the record, the Italian daily *La Stampa* ran the numbers. For the roughly four million legal immigrants in Italy, Crociata is basically correct: the crime rate is so close to that of the general population as to be statistically indistinguishable. A much higher percentage of the estimated one million illegal immigrants ? known in Italian as ?clandestines? ? are behind bars, but most have been jailed precisely for being illegal. The only category of crime unrelated to immigration status in which clandestines appear over-represented is petty theft.

tWhy do the Italian bishops seem outspokenly pro-immigrant, in contrast with the reticence I predicted?

tObviously, the defense of immigrant rights is part of the social teaching of the Catholic Church, and one has to assume that Crociata and others are speaking up in the first place because they think it?s the right thing to do.

tBeyond that, three other factors may be in play.

tFirst, relations between CEI and the Berlusconi government remain tense in the wake of the ?Boffo case? last summer, in which the then-editor of the Italian bishops? newspaper, Dino Boffo, was forced to resign over rumors of a gay affair first reported in a paper owned by Berlusconi?s brother and edited by a political ally. Whatever its merits, that report was widely seen as payback for Boffo?s decision to publish a few bits of criticism of Berlusconi in *L?Avvenire*, the bishops? paper, when a scandal erupted about Berlusconi?s alleged taste for young call girls. The rift has opened a space in which Catholic leaders who have a beef with Berlusconi are probably a bit bolder about taking him on.

tIt?s worth noting that both Pope Benedict XVI and the Italian bishops also spoke out this week on unemployment, effectively criticizing the lack of a strong jobs program from the Berlusconi government. ?We?re seeing families that once had work now out in the streets,? Crociata said. ?I can?t enter into the socio-economical and technical complexities, but I believe that we have to hear this cry of pain.?

tSecond, Italian bishops live cheek-by-jowl with the Vatican and tend to be heavily influenced by Vatican thinking. Conscious that Catholicism?s growth these days is occurring mostly in the global South, the Vatican is ever more sensitive to the social and political concerns of Catholic leaders in the developing world ? and the just treatment of immigrants in the West is, for obvious reasons, high on that list. Some of the Vatican?s global perspective, in other words, may be rubbing off on CEI.

tThird, the pro-immigrant stance in Italy could also be read as an extension of Pope Benedict XVI's interest in "inter-cultural" dialogue between Christianity and other faiths -- in this case, principally Islam. Ambivalence about Muslim immigration is logical if one's core concern is maintaining the confessional "balance of power" in Europe. If, however, one embraces Benedict's model of Christian life in the West as a "creative minority," then a more pressing concern is forming alliances with other social groups which share similar values on questions such as the defense of human life or the public role of religion. In that regard, the arrival of new Muslim immigrants in Europe (or religiously dynamic Pentecostals from Africa, or faithful Hindus from India, etc.) could be viewed an a boon rather than a threat.

tTime will tell whether a contrast between European and American bishops on immigration will eventually emerge, but at least for now, Italy doesn?t seem a case in point.

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