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Pope launches council to fight secular 'Eclipse of God'

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One classic way for bureaucracies to express their priorities is by which topics merit their own departments. By that logic, Pope Benedict XVI sent a clear signal tonight that the Vatican cares about the threat posed by secularization, announcing the creation of a brand new Pontifical Council devoted to the re-evangelization of the Christian West.

Benedict did not give a formal name for the new office, but reports indicate it will be called "Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization." Its job, according to the pope, will be to resist an "eclipse of the sense of God" in secular cultures.

tThough Benedict did not reveal his choice to lead the enterprise, it?s widely expected that the new Vatican department, known as a ?dicastery,? will be entrusted to Italian Archbishop Rino Fisichella, currently President of the Pontifical Academy for Life and a former chaplain to the Italian parliament.

tIf so, the move would amount to a papal vote of confidence for the embattled Fisichella, who has come under fire in his current post by pro-life groups for allegedly taking too soft a line on the question of excommunication for those involved in abortions.

When Ratzinger was elected to the papacy five years ago, many cardinals at the time said they had turned to him because they regarded him as the figure best equipped to respond to the crisis of secularization in the West, especially in Europe. His choice of name, ?Benedict,? was in part a reference to St. Benedict, the founder of European monasticism.

tIn the intervening five years, a series of controversies and scandals during Benedict?s pontificate ? most recently, the global sexual abuse crisis swirling around the Catholic church ? has often obscured that aim, and arguably made it far more difficult to realize, at least in the short term. Nevertheless, the creation of a new council suggests that Benedict has not thrown in the towel.

tDuring his homily this evening for a vespers service to open the annual feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, Benedict said he decided to create the new department to promote renewed evangelization of traditionally Christian nations ?living through a progressive secularization of society and a sort of ?eclipse of the sense of God.??

tThat eclipse, Benedict said, ?constitutes a challenge to find adequate means to re-propose the perennial truths of the Gospel of Christ.?

tAside from the overt logic of the new department, the creation of the new Council and Fisichella?s appointment to head it are striking for two other reasons.

First, the decision to create the new Pontifical Council is another indication of Benedict XVI?s fondness for the Communion and Liberation movement. The idea for a ?Council for the New Evangelization? was first floated by Fr. Luigi Giussani, founder of the Communion and Liberation movement, in the early 1980s, but was not taken up by Pope John Paul II. More recently, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice, himself close to the Communion and Liberation movement, represented the idea to Benedict XVI.

tBenedict?s affinity for the movement is well known. Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger delivered the homily at Giussani?s funeral Mass in 2005, and a group of consecrated women who are part of the Memores Domini group within Communion and Liberation run Benedict?s papal household.

tSecond, if Fisichella indeed becomes the first president of the new council, it would be a show of papal support for compassion in pressing the church?s pro-life argument.

tA philosopher by training, Fisichella and Ratzinger were primary advisors to John Paul II for his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. In 2008, Benedict named Fisichella as President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, the Vatican?s primary pro-life body of scholars and activists. His role in Italian politics, his media savvy, and his background in philosophy rather than theology have all given Fisichella a profile as someone who knows how to talk to the secular world, making him a logical candidate to head a council dedicated to re-evangelizing the West.

tFisichella is also an ambivalent figure, however, for some of the church?s most staunchly pro-life forces, as a result of his role in a 2009 controversy from Brazil involving an abortion for a nine-year-old girl. The girl had become pregnant after reportedly being raped by her stepfather, and her mother arranged for an abortion. Archbishop Jose Cardoso Sobrinho of Olinda and Recife, upon learning of the case, announced that the mother, the doctor, and others involved in the abortion were excommunicated.

tSobrinho?s position aroused widespread protest in Brazil and around the world, but drew swift backing from Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, prefect of the Vatican?s Congregation for Bishops. Fisichella, however, then penned a front-page essay in *L?Osservatore Romano* that appeared to criticize Sobrinho.
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?Before giving thought to excommunication, it was necessary and urgent to safeguard the innocent life of this girl, and return her to a level of humanity of which we, men of the church, should be expert heralds and teachers,? Fisichella wrote.

What is needed now, he added, ?is the sign of a testimony of closeness with the one suffering, an act of mercy that, even while firmly maintaining the principle, is able to look beyond the juridical sphere.?

That article brought protests both from bishops in Brazil and from pro-life activists all over the world, resulting in a July 10 ?clarification? from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith indicating that church teaching on abortion has not changed and will not change.

Within the Pontifical Academy for Life, a group of members led by Belgian Monsignor Michel Schooyans wrote a lengthy letter calling for Fisichella?s removal, arguing that he had falsely invoked the concept of ?compassion? to justify actions contrary to Christian morality.

Nonetheless, Fisichella has remained on the job ? and now appears headed for a new one, obviously close to the pope?s heart.

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