

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

July 2, 2010 at 2:57am

Friday Vatican potpourri

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NCR Today

Friday heading into the July 4 weekend seems a good time for a "reporter's notebook" round-up of footnotes and nuggets from a dramatic week on the Vatican news beat.

For the record, Pope Benedict XVI will spend July 4 on a one-day pastoral visit to the central Italian town of Sulmona, the home of Pope Celestine V, who reigned briefly in 1294 and was canonized in 1313. Sulmona is currently celebrating a "jubilee year" dedicated to Celestine's 800th birthday, and while Benedict is in town, he will pray before the relics of Celestine in the crypt of the local cathedral. One wonders what will be going through Benedict's head at that moment; Celestine never wanted to be elected pope, he resigned just five months after his election (without ever entering Rome), and was later tossed into jail where, some believe, he was killed by his successor.

The Crucifix Controversy

Joseph Weiler of New York University may well be the Vatican's favorite Jewish lawyer. An expert on European law, Weiler took a forceful position several years ago in favor of an explicit reference to God and to Europe's Christian heritage in the preamble to the new EU constitutional document.

This week he was defending Europe's Christian legacy again, representing eight of the ten governments appealing a November decree from the European Court of Human Rights ordering Italy to remove crucifixes from public school classrooms.

"Italy without the crucifix wouldn't be Italy," Weiler told a hearing of the court in Strasbourg, "just as France with the crucifix wouldn't be France."

Weiler spoke on Wednesday before the "grand chamber" of 19 judges of the European Court of Human

Rights. Because the decisions of the court are at least theoretically binding on the 47 member states of the Council of Europe, its decision could have implications well beyond Italy.

A final decision is not expected for several months, though an Italian government minister said he expects the court to rule in Italy's favor.

"I don't think that everyone who sings 'God Save the Queen' [in England] believes in God," Weiler said, "but I think they would be shocked if they were told that phrase had to be changed or removed because it offends someone."

Weiler's comments were given ample coverage in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper. Officially speaking, the Vatican is not a party to the case before the European court, but it expressed strong concern about the ruling last November.

The other nations joining Italy in the appeal are Armenia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Malta, San Marino, Romania and Russia. Strikingly, none of the large traditionally Catholic nations of Western Europe have come to Italy's defense; instead, its strongest allies in this case are largely Orthodox nations of Eastern Europe.

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Weiler, by the way, is no stranger to Catholic circles. In 2003 he was a featured speaker at the "Meeting" in Rimini organized by the Communion and Liberation movement, which annually brings together roughly 700,000 Catholics, the majority from Italy but also drawing significant numbers from other parts of Europe and the world.

On that occasion, Weiler complained that Christian politicians, jurists and intellectuals in Europe weren't being aggressive enough in defending the continent's Christian identity.

"It stupefies me, because papal texts such as *Ecclesia in Europa*, *Redemptoris Missio* and *Centesimus Annus* are rich with points that deserve to be introduced into the debate on European integration," Weiler said. "Christians today seem to me to be closed into a ghetto, which is partly the result of a widespread 'Christophobia' in Europe, and partly constructed by the Christians themselves."

"It's less sorrowful than the ghetto in which my ancestors were confined," Weiler said, "but it's a ghetto nonetheless."

Benedict and Bertone

In Rome, wags like to say that Pope Benedict XVI and his Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, are "joined at the hip," meaning that Bertone will probably be on the job as long as Benedict is pope.

That impression seemed cemented in January when Benedict asked Bertone to stay in the job despite the fact that Bertone turned 75 in December, and this week another confirmation came in the form of a letter from the pope on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Bertone's ordination to the priesthood.

"Between us there's a reciprocal and constant familiarity, which derives from the fact that we find ourselves together almost every day," the pope wrote.

?I wanted you close to me as my collaborator,? Benedict wrote, saying that he wanted his ?regard? for Bertone to be clear.

Italian commentators noted that the pope used the personal and informal ?tu? form of address with Bertone, another way of signaling his affection.

tBertone, a Salesian, is a longtime papal confidante, having served as then-Cardinal Ratzinger?s number two official in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1995 to 2002.

tIn the eyes of many observers, his tenure as Secretary of State has been a mixed bag.

The Vatican has a president/prime minister structure, in which the Secretary of State more or less runs the day-to-day governance of the church. In the past, Secretaries of State have sometimes represented quasi-independent power centers, accused of pursuing agenda separate from, and occasionally at odds with, the popes they served. There?s little of that with Bertone, who is more of a ?secretary? in the classic sense, taking his cues from his longtime mentor.

tHis administrative abilities, however, have come in for question. From the fiasco of the Holocaust-denying bishop to the notorious Italian ?Boffo case,? as well as the Vatican?s response to the sexual abuse crisis, critics have suggested that Bertone too often fails to head off problems before they occur, and is slow and ineffective in responding when they do.

tOne prominent American archbishop put the point this way: ?They threw Bertone into the deep end of the pool, and found out he couldn?t swim.?

tBe that as it may, Benedict XVI has made it clear that Bertone isn?t going anywhere.

tIn tandem with the meeting earlier this week in which Benedict XVI presided over a reconciliation between Cardinals Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, and Angelo Sodano, dean the former Secretary of State under Pope John Paul II, the letter to Bertone seems to be part of a broader effort by the pope to promote unity among his top tier of advisors.

That point was echoed yesterday by Gian Maria Vian, editor of *L?Osservatore Romano*, who editorialized that the success of a new Vatican department to reawaken Christianity in the West will depend upon two things: ecumenical unity among Christians, and unity ?within the Catholic community.?

Obama and the Vatican

tAs President Barack Obama was exiting his first-ever meeting with Pope Benedict XVI in the Vatican one year ago, his parting comment to the pontiff was, ?We look forward to a very strong relationship.?

tOn many fronts, the stars seemed aligned for just that: The Vatican had reacted far more warmly to Obama?s election than at least some Catholic bishops in the United States; the pope and the president had just painted broadly similar visions of détente between the West and the Islamic world, Benedict during a trip to the Holy Land and Obama during a high-profile speech in Cairo; and Benedict?s economic encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* contained numerous points of contact with the economic reforms, both domestic and global, sought by the new Obama administration.

tIn the year since, however, that ?very strong relationship? has yet to take shape.

tIn part, that?s because the dominant political debate in the States during the past year was health care

reform, which saw the U.S. bishops and the White House at odds over the bill's implications for public funding of abortion. The Vatican was reluctant to cozy up to Obama in a way that might be seen as undercutting the bishops' line -- especially after some American bishops had complained to Rome about the Vatican's initial reaction to the new administration.

In part, both Obama and Benedict have been tied down by crises: most recently, the oil spill for Obama and the sexual abuse scandals for Benedict.

Yet the potential is still there for partnerships on a number of fronts, and one opportunity to explore that potential may come on Oct. 12, when the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See hosts a conference with the Pontifical Gregorian University titled "Building Bridges of Hope: Success Stories and Strategies for Inter-Faith Actions."

Though the Vatican is not formally sponsoring the event, it dovetails with an Oct. 15-16 symposium on *Caritas in Veritate in the United States*, which is being held at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. (In the interests of full disclosure, I've been invited to join that symposium as a participant.)

U.S. Ambassador Miguel Diaz would seem to be hoping that the Oct. 12 conference may be a chance to restart conversations about possible areas of collaboration.

The prospects may get a boost if immigration reform becomes to the next twelve months in American politics what health care reform was last year. Obama gave a speech at American University on Thursday calling immigration reform a "moral imperative," and if momentum builds, it might give Obama and the bishops a chance to be on the same page -- which, in turn, could change the calculus for the Vatican and the White House.

The Vatican also reacted favorably to a recent brief from the Obama administration before the United States Supreme Court, effectively endorsing the Vatican's view that sovereign immunity should bar a sex abuse lawsuit against the Vatican in Oregon. In the end, however, the Supreme Court opted not to intervene in the Oregon case.

Koch and Kasper

As expected, Bishop Kurt Koch of Basel, was formally named yesterday as the successor of Cardinal Walter Kasper, 77, as President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews.

In some circles, Koch's appointment has been interpreted as reflecting a reorientation of ecumenical priorities from West to East, especially to the Orthodox. Yet while Koch has been a member of the International Catholic/Orthodox theological dialogue, he's also been part of the international Catholic/Lutheran dialogue commission, and he said yesterday that he's committed to building relationships with both the Orthodox and the churches of the Reformation.

The World Council of Churches, the main Protestant ecumenical body, issued a statement saying that Koch is a well-known figure and praising his "openness and deep ecumenical commitment."

In an interview with the German branch of Vatican Radio yesterday, Koch seemed to suggest that he'll emphasize ecclesiology, or doctrines about the church, in ecumenical conversation. The starting point on that subject is easier with the Eastern churches, he said, because Catholics and Orthodox "share a sacramental view of the church and apostolic succession among the bishops."

The American Jewish Committee also issued a statement welcoming Koch's appointment.

"Bishop Koch has a fine record of deep friendship with the Swiss Jewish community, as well as profound commitment to the singular religious and historical nature of the church's relationship with Judaism and Jewry," said Rabbi David Rosen, director of the Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee and a veteran of Catholic/Jewish dialogue.

Meanwhile, Kasper's retirement marks the end of an era. The distinguished German theologian has been the face of the Vatican's relationships with other Christians and Jews for the last decade.

Often Kasper was the man who would step in after controversy had erupted, whether it was the revival of a Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews, or the erection of Catholic dioceses in Russia, or a declaration that Protestants aren't "sister churches." Whatever the issue, he always upheld the Vatican line, but usually found a more diplomatic and soothing way of expressing it. (Over the years, that sometimes led observers to wonder why Kasper wasn't more involved in crafting those moves before they were announced.)

On June 25, Kasper met with reporters for a farewell session, anticipating his July 1 replacement.

"For eleven years, this has been for me not just a demanding but also a fascinating task, absolutely a life-defining experience," he said. He called the push for Christian unity the "construction site of the church of the future."

Not denying the various ecumenical crises which dot the landscape, Kasper nonetheless insisted that things are more promising than newspaper headlines might suggest. Friendships across denominational lines are strong, he said, which means that when controversies do erupt, they're more easily managed.

Kasper compared ecumenism to an "invisible monastery in which people live and pray, scattered all over the world, but joined in prayer. Isn't this an intense, deep ecclesial communion as it is?"

Kasper also revealed one insider nugget, which speaks both to his humility as well as the sensitivity of the Jewish/Catholic relationship. When John Paul II offered him the job, Kasper said, he was reluctant to take over the relationship with Jews, because he wasn't sure how they would react to a German in that position.

Yet, Kasper said, over the years Jewish leaders have never made an issue out of it. Today, he said, a new generation of Jewish leaders is coming onto the scene, certainly committed to keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive, but also anxious to look to the future.

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