

A Vatican literacy quiz

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 23, 2010 All Things Catholic

I happen to be a baseball guy, but fans of any sport will readily recognize two points: One, the pleasure that comes from talking about the game with someone who really knows their stuff; two, the agony of being trapped with a blowhard who doesn't know the infield fly rule from the designated hitter, but who nevertheless feels compelled to broadcast his or her opinions -- why the Yankees' payroll is unjust, why Manny Ramirez is overrated, and so on.

The insufferable part isn't whatever conclusion the person advocates (I can see the case for both of the above, though I demur on each point), but the blend of ignorance and certitude in which they usually come wrapped. In such moments, one yearns for somebody to enforce the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's dictum: "Everybody's entitled to their own opinion, but nobody's entitled to their own facts."

More or less the same observation, in my experience, applies to debates about the Vatican. In recent weeks, the air has been filled with competing opinions on various Vatican matters: Whether or not it was appropriate for the Vatican to treat the sexual abuse of minors and the attempted ordination of women in the same legal document, for example, or whether Pope Benedict XVI's record on handling sex abuse cases while he was at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith passes muster. People who've done their homework can reach very different conclusions on such subjects, and informed perspectives are always worth hearing.

What's tougher to take, however, are polemics (whether intended to praise the Vatican or to bury it) from commentators who obviously don't know a *motu proprio* from a miter, or a dicastery from a deacon.

Herewith, therefore, my summer contribution to the ecclesiastical version of barroom arguments: A ten-point Vatican literacy test, designed to establish someone's bona fides. These questions test entry-level material, the kind of stuff that people paying attention would know, as opposed to being arcane points that only real devotees could summon.

If you can imagine yourself being sucked into an unwanted debate about papal policy, I suggest you clip this column and shove it in your wallet, so you can produce it at the just-right moment. Faced with someone who insists on voicing strong opinions, but who can't go at least eight-for-ten off the top of their head, you might suggest they take a pledge of abstinence for a year from posting blog entries, writing letters to the editor or op/ed pieces, or otherwise holding forth on any Vatican subject, while they go on retreat and bone up.

VATICAN LITERACY QUIZ

1) Which of the following is not the last name of a 20th century pope?

- A. Roncalli
- B. Sodano
- C. Montini
- D. Luciani

- 2) Which of the following is *not* a traditional term for a Vatican department?
- A. Congregation
 - B. Committee
 - C. Council
 - D. Commission
- 3) Roughly how many bishops participate in a Synod of Bishops?
- A. 10
 - B. 100
 - C. 250
 - D. 2,000
- 4) What's the term for the central government of the Catholic Church as a sovereign entity in international law?
- A. Apostolic Camera
 - B. Holy See
 - C. Vatican City-State
 - D. Sala Stampa
- 5) Which Vatican department oversees foreign relations?
- A. Congregation for Bishops
 - B. Secretariat of State
 - C. Council for Justice and Peace
 - D. Prefecture of the Papal Household
- 6) What's the name of the Vatican newspaper?
- 7) Which of the following is *not* a kind of papal document?
- A. Apostolic summons
 - B. Apostolic exhortation
 - C. Apostolic constitution
 - D. Apostolic letter
- 8) Which Pontifical Council is the youngest?
- A. Laity
 - B. Family
 - C. Migrants and Refugees
 - D. New Evangelization
- 9) True or False: There is no provision in church law for a pope to resign.
- 10) Which of the following is not presently headed by an American?
- A. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith
 - B. Basilica of St. Mary Major
 - C. Council for Justice and Peace
 - D. Prefecture of the Papal Household

(Answers)

1. B, Sodano. Cardinal Angelo Sodano was Secretary of State from 1990 to 2006 and is still the Dean of the College of Cardinals. Angelo Roncalli was the given name of Pope John XXIII, Giovanni Battista Montini was Paul VI, and Albino Luciani was John Paul I.

2. B, Committee. There are no bodies which are formally called "committees" in the Vatican, but there are Congregations, Pontifical Councils, and Pontifical Commissions.
3. C, 250. The majority are elected by bishops' conferences around the world, while a few are directly appointed by the pope. Heads of Vatican departments automatically participate on an *ex officio* basis.
4. The "Holy See" is the term for the papacy as the seat of government for the worldwide Catholic church, so it is the "Holy See," not the "Vatican," which exchanges ambassadors with foreign nations. Currently the Holy See enjoys diplomatic relations with 178 countries as well as the European Union and the Order of Malta, plus a special mission to the Palestinian Liberation Organization. It also has observer status at the United Nations.
5. B, Secretariat of State. Often regarded as a sort of "super-dicastery" that coordinates the work of the other Vatican offices, the Secretariat of State has two sections: the First Section, which deals with internal church matters, and the Second Section, which handles relations with states.
6. *L'Osservatore Romano*, founded in 1861.
7. A, Apostolic summons. An "apostolic constitution" is a legal document on a matter of high importance, such as the constitution issuing the Catechism of the Catholic Church. An "apostolic exhortation" is a reflection on a specific topic, usually issued after a Synod of Bishops, and an "apostolic letter" is a reflection on points of doctrine.
8. D, New Evangelization. A "Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization," dedicated to revising the faith in the West, was announced earlier this month by Pope Benedict XVI though it hasn't yet been formally created. The Pontifical Council for the Laity was founded in 1967, while the Pontifical Council for the Family came in 1981 and the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People in 1988.
9. False. Canon 332§2 of the Code of Canon Law states: "If it happens that the Roman Pontiff resigns his office, it is required for validity that the resignation is made freely and properly manifested but not that it is accepted by anyone."
10. C, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, which is presently led by Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana. All the rest have Americans at the top: The Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is Cardinal William Levada, the Archpriest of the Basilica of St. Mary Major is Cardinal Bernard Law, and the Prefect of the Papal Household is Archbishop James Harvey.

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