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Of all people, Cardinal Kasper?

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 16, 2010 NCR Today

LONDON -- In the abstract, if you were to pick the Vatican personality least likely to cause a diplomatic and media row on the eve of a papal trip, it would probably be Cardinal Walter Kasper, who recently retired after a decade as the pope?s top official for ecumenism and relations with Jews.

Time and again in recent years, Kasper, now 77, was the Vatican?s go-to guy to soothe hurt feelings and to smooth over a crisis. So entrenched was that reputation that some wags actually dubbed him "Kasper the Friendly Cardinal."

When the Vatican document *Dominus Iesus* caused a firestorm a decade ago by asserting that non-Christians are in an ?objectively deficient situation,? it was Kasper who assured the world that the church?s commitment to inter-faith harmony was intact. Last year, when the lifting of the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop threatened to derail Catholic-Jewish relations, it was Kasper who worked the phones to reassure Jewish leaders that the church?s commitment to fighting anti-Semitism endures.

Most recently, when the preacher of the papal household compared criticism of Pope Benedict to anti-Semitism during a Good Friday service in Rome, Kasper once again stepped into the breach.

At least in terms of public image, Kasper has sometime seemed a kinder, gentler version of Joseph Ratzinger, the man who is now Pope Benedict XVI. Both are accomplished German theologians, both profoundly committed to the church?s teaching and mission. Yet where Ratzinger has been a sometimes polarizing figure for his outspoken defense of Catholic orthodoxy, Kasper was always the diplomat, finding ways to express the same ideas in language that defused tense situations.

One imagines that Benedict XVI must therefore be astonished to find that it was Kasper, of all people, who threatened to overshadow the opening act of the pope?s Sept. 16-19 trip to the United Kingdom with some ill-chosen and explosive language.

In an interview with a German magazine this week, the cardinal said that ?When you arrive at Heathrow you think at times that you?ve landed in a Third World country.? That line received huge play today in the British press and was widely taken as a slight. (My proof is that a cab driver on the way in from Heathrow today, upon learning that I was here to cover the pope, asked me: ?Third world country? Who does that bloke think he is??)

Kasper?s secretary, Monsignor Oliver Lahl, has told media outlets that the cardinal doesn?t intend to apologize, because he only meant to say that the U.K. is an increasingly multi-cultural society.

?He was simply saying that Britain is no longer a mono-cultural country,? Lahl told reporters. ?There was nothing racist or xenophobic in that. He can?t understand why this has become such a big issue in the past. He is in bed so he can?t check the internet to look at the coverage, but he has been informed.?

Kasper, who was originally set to be part of the delegation accompanying Pope Benedict to the U.K., dropped

out due to illness before the contretemps over his comments erupted.

Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, also applied a bit of gloss on Kasper?s behalf. The cardinal was referring to "a cosmopolitan reality,? Lombardi said, ?a melting pot of ordinary humanity and all of its diversity and its problems.?

To be clear, anyone who knows Kasper realizes he didn?t intend to give offense. He?s an admirer of English literature and culture, and has a special fondness for the Anglican Communion (another constituency with whom Kasper has long played the role of papal trouble-shooter.)

Yet the toxic fallout from his interview can be glimpsed from the reaction of Scottish Cardinal Keith O? Brien, who more or less called on Kasper to apologize.

?That was unfortunate, and each and every person's aides sometimes do make awkward, difficult remarks,? O'Brien told BBC Radio Scotland. ?Sometimes we make awkward, difficult remarks ourselves.

?And simply, if we do that sort of thing we apologize for it, and I'm sure Cardinal Kasper will apologize for any intemperate remarks which he made some time ago,? O?Brien said.

Vatican officials, of course, sometimes seem to have a genius for saying exactly the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time. The fact that this time it was the guy whose specialty has always been solving PR problems, not creating them, might nevertheless be taken as a new low.

[John L. Allen, Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent.]

John Allen will be filing reports throughout the Papal visit to the U.K. Sept. 16-19. Stay tuned to NCR Today[1] for updates.

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- Hijacking or setting him free, Benedict loves Newman [2], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Benedict finds unlikely ally in British PM [3], by John L. Allen, Jr.
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- Trying to solve the church's communications problem [5], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope meets with sex abuse victims [6], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Analysis: Benedict's in a box in talking about the crisis [7], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope apologizes for 'unspeakable crimes' of sex abuse [8], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Joint statement on meeting between Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury [9]
- Benedict in Britain: We get it, we've got it, let's share it [10], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope calls on religions to defend environment, human life [11], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Full text of pope's comments on the crisis [12], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Of all people, Cardinal Kasper? [13], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Benedict battles the 'dictatorship of relativism' [14], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope on crisis: 'We weren't fast enough' [15], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Benedict to step into buzz saw of dissent during upcoming UK visit [16], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Newman still commands our attention [17], an NCR editorial
- He even prayed 'with a pen in his hand' [18], a book review by Peter L?Estrange
- Hijacking Newman [19], by Dennis Coday
- Newman: the 'sense' and 'consent' of the faithful [20], a viewpoint by Robert McClory

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- Fr. Joseph Komonchak, taught ecclesiology at Catholic University, wrote his dissertation on Newman [21]
- Christopher Pramuk, Assistant professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati [22]
- Ian Ker, Professor at Oxford University and author of a Newman biography [23]
- The Very Reverend Richard Duffield, the Provost of the Birmingham Oratory [24]
- Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster and Primate of England [25]

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[2] http://ncronline.org/node/20317
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/20316
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/20315
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/20314
[6] http://ncronline.org/node/20313
[7] http://ncronline.org/node/20309
[8] http://ncronline.org/node/20308
[9] http://ncronline.org/node/20303
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