

Pope's visit, week's stories show divisions, rays of hope

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 24, 2010 All Things Catholic

Three important stories washed across the Catholic radar screen this week, each with something to say about where things stand vis-à-vis the church in the early 21st century. They were:

- The conclusion of Pope Benedict XVI's improbably successful Sept. 16-19 trip to the United Kingdom, which, according to British Prime Minister David Cameron, made the secular Brits "sit up and listen?";
- A new Vatican Bank scandal, with \$30 million in bank funds frozen by Italian authorities and its top two officials placed under investigation for alleged violations of anti-money laundering protocols;
- A strong statement from the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. bishops' conference accusing two Creighton theologians of distorting the Catholic moral tradition on issues such as homosexuality, contraception, and artificial reproduction.

Taken together, these three developments confirm that the Catholic church is beset by important challenges, both from within and without, but also suggest that it may possess some surprising residual strength.

Below, I'll offer background on each story and then offer some fleeting thoughts about what they all mean.

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Heading into Benedict's U.K. trip, the prophets of doom had a field day. They warned that the U.K. is a thoroughly secular nation, one with a long history of anti-papal resentment, and that Benedict XVI would arrive carrying massive baggage due to the sexual abuse crisis.

As I've observed before, it's the perverse effect of such predictions that they set the bar terribly low, so anything that happens can be styled a success. It's not a shocker, therefore, that Benedict XVI exceeded expectations, drawing warm and enthusiastic crowds and often disarming his critics with his gentle, warm personality.

One British tabloid enthused that the "Rottweiler" had been transformed into a "holy grandfather."

What's more surprising is that the U.K. trip was a rare case in which the message Benedict came to deliver was more or less the one his public actually heard. Aside from a minor contretemps when Cardinal Walter Kasper compared arriving in London's Heathrow Airport to stepping into a Third World country, the Vatican largely avoided any new PR stumbles. Because Benedict tackled the sexual abuse crisis right out of the gate, he was not seen as ducking the issue, allowing media outlets and public interest to focus on something else.

That "something else" was Benedict's forceful argument about the role of religion in public life. In effect, Benedict XVI conducted a four-day national seminar in the U.K. about the relationship between faith and secular society, and the miracle of it is, people actually seemed to be listening.

Arguably the trip's peak moment came with the pope's Sept. 17 speech in Westminster Hall, delivered in the same building where St. Thomas More was tried and condemned in 1535 for refusing to acknowledge King Henry VIII as head of the church. Benedict spoke before the cream of the political and social crop in Britain, including four former Prime Ministers: Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, and Gordon Brown.

The heart of the speech was a pitch for constructive dialogue between faith and reason, and therefore between church and state. As he has before, Benedict argued that reason shorn of faith becomes destructive ideology; faith without reason shades off into a distorted "sectarianism and fundamentalism."

One measure of the pontiff's success is that at trip's end, Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg of the New North London Synagogue and Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari of the Muslim Council of Britain went on national television to say that the experience had been good for all faiths in the U.K., not just Christianity.

To be sure, Benedict remains a somewhat polarizing figure, and that ferment was visible in the London streets. Some 10,000 atheists and secularists, gay rights activists, people scandalized by the sex abuse crisis, and even a few radical Protestant Evangelicals marched on Saturday night, massing in Downing Street to hear Richard Dawkins declare the pope an "enemy of humanity." It was the largest public protest this pope has ever seen, and one of the largest in modern times.

Nevertheless, as Benedict left, the basic feeling was that the trip had been a triumph for the pope. Catherine Peppinster of *The Tablet* said the mood among local Catholics was "euphoric," while Cardinal Keith O'Brien of Edinburgh said people are already talking about a "Benedict bounce."

One British paper editorialized that in the run-up to the trip, some feared the pope would be shouted down, but instead he was heard with "respectful attention." In a culture whose ethos was once memorably expressed by a spin doctor for Tony Blair as "We don't do God," that alone should probably be considered a breakthrough.

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Benedict scarcely had a chance to towel down from the U.K. outing before yet another crisis threatened to break out in Rome. This time it centers on the Vatican Bank, as Italian authorities announced Monday that they had frozen \$30 million in assets and placed Ettore Gotti Tedeschi, the bank's president, along with general director Paolo Cipriani, under investigation for alleged violations of money-laundering safeguards.

The formal name for the Vatican Bank is the "Institute for the Works of Religion," or IOR. The charge is not necessarily that the Vatican Bank was actually laundering money, but rather that two transactions were "suspicious" because they didn't fully comply with disclosure requirements about the source of the funds.

In response, the Vatican promptly declared itself "perplexed and astonished." Ordinarily, I suppose, such reactions carry about the same credibility as Captain Renault in "Casablanca" expressing shock at finding gambling at Rick's, and then collecting his winnings. In this case, however, the dismay seems genuine.

Inside the Vatican, it's well known that Benedict XVI has long been worried about the potential for precisely this sort of embarrassment. That's why he brought in the distinguished Italian economist Gotti Tedeschi, a former member of the board at the Italian banking giant Sanpaolo, to run the Vatican Bank in 2008, and it's also why an "office of information" was created inside the bank under Cardinal Attilio Nicora, President of the Apostolic Patrimony of the Holy See, to coordinate disclosure requirements.

Nicora is widely known as the Vatican's "numbers man." He was the architect of the financial dimension of a 1984 revision to the concordat with Italy signed under Mussolini in 1929, known as the "Lateran Pacts." Gotti Tedeschi was a contributor to Benedict's social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, an important theme in which was

precisely the need for greater ethical responsibility in matters of finance.

Secular financial experts have long feared that because of the Vatican Bank's special status, it could inadvertently become a sort of Cayman Islands-esque haven for depositors squeamish about revealing where their money comes from. Especially in a post-9/11 world, the idea of large amounts of money moving around the globe without an adequate paper trail makes people rightly nervous.

Sensitive to that concern, the Vatican Bank has been working with the Bank of Italy since the beginning of the year to comply with international anti-money laundering protocols. Vatican officials also say that Benedict is considering a global restructuring of Vatican finances in the direction of greater transparency, which could culminate in a new *motu proprio*, or legal document under his personal authority.

L'Osservatore Romano asserted that the probe announced this week rests on a "misunderstanding" that can be resolved "quickly and easily." If so, why the big public splash from Italian prosecutors?

One possibility is that civil authorities realize that not everyone in the Vatican is thrilled about the looming reforms. That's not because anyone seriously wants the Vatican Bank to protect terrorists and tax cheats, but rather on the principle that too much interference by secular regulatory bodies could compromise the church's independence. The whole point of Vatican finance, they argue, is to ensure the pope's freedom of action, and allowing the EU or other international organisms to dictate how the Vatican Bank can operate might call that into question.

In that sense, one could read the actions this week as a "shot across the bow," a warning about what might be in store if the reforms now underway were to be aborted. If that's the case, the unfortunate collateral damage is that the Vatican personnel most directly targeted are the ones already on board -- Nicora and Gotti Tedeschi.

In any event, it will be fascinating to see what effect these events have -- accelerating the process of reform, or stiffening the resolve of those in the Vatican dubious about its long-term consequences.

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Stateside, the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. bishops' conference issued a strong statement this week condemning a book by two theologians from Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, which argues for a more permissive view of homosexuality, contraception, and other contentious issues in sexual morality.

The two theologians are Michael Lawler, now retired, and Todd Salzman, who is chair of the theology department at Creighton. Their 2008 book, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* was published by Georgetown University Press. It proposes a "person-centered" morality, as opposed to what the authors see as a more physical analysis of moral acts in official Catholic teaching.

In concrete, Salzman and Lawler suggest that the church's prohibitions on a wide variety of sexual topics ought to be softened.

The 24-page statement from the doctrine committee doesn't dwell on the specific conclusions that the two theologians reach, but rather their premises, specifically their approach to scripture and natural law. In both cases, the thrust of the criticism is that Lawler and Salzman take an overly skeptical stance -- suggesting that the Bible is conditioned by its socio-historical setting, and that "natural law" is a social construct.

At the moment, it doesn't seem that any disciplinary consequences, such as a period of silence or a prohibition on publishing, are on the immediate horizon. The Committee on Doctrine has no authority to impose such measures, and Archbishop George Lucas of Omaha has expressed "confidence" that Creighton will handle the situation in a way consistent with its Catholic identity.

It remains to be seen whether the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith might take an interest in *The Sexual Person*, and what steps it might consider should an official review be launched.

Salzman declined a request to comment, but Creighton University issued a statement saying that it's committed both to Catholic doctrine and to academic freedom, and thanking Lucas for fostering a "positive working relationship."

For the record, this is not the first time that Lawler and Salzman have been in hot water. Back in 2007, articles published by the two theologians, anticipating many of the themes of their book, were criticized by Omaha's then-Archbishop, Elden Curtiss, for expressing "serious error"[that] cannot be considered authentic Catholic teaching."

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Now for three broad observations about these developments, two of which speak to endemic challenges facing Catholicism at the dawn of the 21st century, and a third which points to some encouraging signals.

Church/state tensions

The Vatican Bank probe probably ought to be viewed in tandem with the police raids on church properties in Belgium earlier this year as part of an investigation of sex abuse allegations, or for that matter revisions to church subsidies in Spain and the 2007 "equality law" in the United Kingdom that denied church-run adoption agencies which receive public funding the right to refuse to place children with same-sex couples.

Across the board, the tendency in the West these days is to eviscerate anything that looks like privilege or "special treatment" for religious institutions, especially the Catholic church. The days in which civil authorities treated the church with kid gloves are basically over, even in ultra-Catholic Italy.

Increasingly, prosecutors and police and crusading activists in civil society look at the Catholic church in roughly the same way they do big business, lobbying and politics, even professional sports -- as potential zones of corruption that need to be held accountable, and that in no way should be "above the law."

Ultimately that may do the church a world of good, cajoling it towards the vision John Paul articulated in 1984 -- that the church should be a "house of glass," in which everyone on the outside can look in and see what's going on. In the short run, however, it's likely to mean that the flash points between church and state will grow in both frequency and intensity.

Fair warning: If the default setting vis-à-vis the church once was deference and caution, from here on in the tendency often probably will be to shoot first and ask questions later.

Internal divisions

The crackdown on the Creighton theologians is a reminder of the persistent divisions within the church, which tend to become especially visible, and especially vitriolic, around issues of sexual morality. The bishops are of course within their rights to say that the positions held by Lawler and Salzman do not reflect official Catholic teaching, but that doesn't mean they aren't shared by a broad swath of the Catholic population.

That point was driven home most recently during Pope Benedict's trip to the U.K., when a poll conducted by the *Sunday Independent* found that solid majorities of British Catholics disagree with the official line on all sorts of issues, including abortion in the case of rape and artificial birth control.

The inflammatory front-page headline was, "You're Wrong, Catholics tell Pope."

Faced with those divisions, one camp would advocate wholesale revision in church teaching to accommodate post-modern sensibilities, another driving out anyone who's not prepared to sign on the dotted line, and yet another ignoring the problem altogether. (Respectively, those would be some liberals, some conservatives, and some bishops.)

Frankly, none of the above seems an especially satisfactory solution.

What's needed is the reconstruction of a "Catholic commons," a space in which members of the various tribes that dot the ecclesiastical landscape can come together and build friendships, so that a deeper "spirituality of communion" can take hold. On the other side of that effort, new ways of expressing eternal truths may emerge which can soften, if perhaps never completely eliminate, the fault lines in the church.

Anyone who can figure out the blueprint for a new Catholic commons may hold the key to the vitality of the church in the 21st century.

Rays of hope

The success of Benedict's trip to the U.K. points to two rays of hope.

First, even in what appear to be thoroughly secularized societies, the religious instinct has hardly been extinguished. Benedict's crowds exceeded expectations, buoyed by substantial Catholic turnout. What was most fascinating, however, was the appeal of the trip to other Christians, members of other religions, and ordinary secular folk who still somehow feel the tug of faith.

Aside from the activists who have a specific beef with the pope, most people seemed curious about what Benedict was saying and doing, and also genuinely impressed with the sincerity and good will of the throngs of pilgrims they saw over these four days. (As a footnote, one of the fruits of a papal visit is that ordinary believers have the chance to tell their stories to a national audience.)

Benedict did not magically refill the churches or win waves of converts, but the largely favorable interest in religion his presence stimulated offered a reminder that many people, even in the heart of the secular world, do still want to believe -- even if, as sociologist Grace Davies has put it, they find it much tougher to belong.

Second, the trip was a reminder that when wielded wisely, the papacy is still a unique bully pulpit, the single greatest asset Catholicism has in shaping public debate. It's difficult to imagine any other figure on the planet who could have come to Great Britain and led a four-day national examination of conscience about the role of religion in public life like Benedict XVI did.

In part, the reason Benedict was able to pull it off was because he gave those prepared to dismiss him no excuse to do so. He did not ride into town breathing fire about the equality laws, abortion, gay marriage, or any of the other fronts in the culture wars. Instead, he went to the foundations of the issue -- the right of citizenship of people of faith in a secular culture that prizes tolerance, and the positive contribution believers can make to common humanitarian and social concerns.

Put that way, it was virtually impossible to paint the pope as an extremist, and it made Dawkins' claim that Benedict is an "enemy of humanity" seem faintly ridiculous. In effect, Benedict's U.K. trip offered a model of how religious leaders can successfully engage secular conversation, through the template of "affirmative orthodoxy" -- no compromise on church teaching, but phrased in terms of what the church says "yes" to, rather than its well-known catalogue of "no's."

This was Benedict's 17th foreign trip, and many of them have left behind the same kind of warm afterglow, only to be quickly swamped by some new crisis or PR meltdown in Rome. One can only hope that in this case, the past is not prologue.

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John Allen traveled with Pope Benedict XVI during the Sept. 16-19 papal trip to Scotland and England. Other NCR contributors offered commentary and insight during the trip. Following is a complete list of NCR stories covering the trip.



Stories in this series on the papal visit to Scotland and England:

- [Pope calls church to be 'humble' model on abuse](#) [2], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- [Hijacking or setting him free, Benedict loves Newman](#) [3], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- [Benedict finds unlikely ally in British PM](#) [4], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- [Polarized opinion on pope fills London streets](#) [5], by John L. Allen, Jr.
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- [Analysis: Benedict's in a box in talking about the crisis](#) [8], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- [Pope apologizes for 'unspeakable crimes' of sex abuse](#) [9], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- [Joint statement on meeting between Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury](#) [10]
- [Benedict in Britain: We get it, we've got it, let's share it](#) [11], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- [Pope calls on religions to defend environment, human life](#) [12], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- [Full text of pope's comments on the crisis](#) [13], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- [Of all people, Cardinal Kasper?](#) [14], by John L. Allen, Jr.
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- [Benedict to step into buzz saw of dissent during upcoming UK visit](#) [17], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- [Newman still commands our attention](#) [18], an NCR editorial
- [He even prayed 'with a pen in his hand'](#) [19], a book review by Peter L'Estrange
- [Hijacking Newman](#) [20], by Dennis Coday
- [Newman: the 'sense' and 'consent' of the faithful](#) [21], a viewpoint by Robert McClory

All this week in his Distinctly Catholic blog, Michael Sean Winters is interviewing a variety of Newman scholars:

- [Fr. Joseph Komonchak, taught ecclesiology at Catholic University, wrote his dissertation on Newman](#) [22]
- [Christopher Pramuk, Assistant professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati](#) [23]
- [Ian Ker, Professor at Oxford University and author of a Newman biography](#) [24]
- [The Very Reverend Richard Duffield, the Provost of the Birmingham Oratory](#) [25]
- [Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster and Primate of England](#) [26]

Related items in Distinctly Catholic:

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 - [Catherine Pepinster, editor of the British Catholic weekly The Tablet](#) [32]
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- [4] <http://ncronline.org/node/20316>
- [5] <http://ncronline.org/node/20315>
- [6] <http://ncronline.org/node/20314>
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