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Vatican's new congregation of clichés doesn't help beleaguered pope

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

After his 19th century visit to America, Charles Dickens expressed great sympathy for anybody who was elected president. No sooner did a man get elected, he noted ruefully, than the people not only began to criticize him but to work toward getting him out of office. Ask any president, in or out of office; they can tell you all about it. But so can Pope Benedict XVI whose resignation is demanded almost daily by one group or another because of his dealing with the clergy sex abuse crisis that has gripped the church for a decade.

Meanwhile, what appears to be a new Congregation of Clichés -- maybe Cardinal Law belongs to this one too -- is managing his schedule and messages as if everything is just fine, and the problems are all out there. The unintended consequence is the appearance of a disconnect as big as the Ritz between the pope and the world and the people around him. Just examine the first week of October.

ABC reports that Australian Queens Counsel Geoffrey Robertson, sounding like a Nuremburg prosecutor, claims that the pope is "morally responsible for a crime against humanity" and "should be made accountable for years of sexual abuse within the Catholic church."

In the same news cycle, Catholic Culture cites a news wire report that Peter Adriaenssens, the psychologist who headed an independent commission examining the hundreds of cases of sex abuse among Belgian priests that have just come to light, says that it is, in effect, the pope's fault and that he should resign to "set an example" of accountability in the church. While one might ask about what to do with the Belgian Bishops who kept silent for years about the problem, Adriaenssens insists that the pope should take the fall to show that "one person is taking responsibility." On almost the same day a federal

judge in Milwaukee ?asked Vatican officials to serve court papers on Pope Benedict XVI ? in connection with a sex-abuse lawsuit involving a Wisconsin priest.?

The pope, of course, has apologized for the scandal many times, has instituted new norms to deal with sex abusing priests, and met with victims of sex abuse by clergy and other church personnel. Why has this obviously sincere and gentle man been unable to calm the flood waters of a crisis that threaten to engulf him?

While these waters swirl around the pope?s shoes and Mideast scholar Bernard Lewis predicts Islam will take over Europe by the end of the century, what does the monsignor in charge of Church Clichés tell us about the pope?s activities?

Well, Pope Benedict left his summer home at Castel Gandolfo Sept. 30, promising the staff his prayers and ?urging them to maintain their own active prayer life and to read the Bible regularly.?

A few days later, the pope praised the Brazilian bishops who were in Rome for their efforts to bring ?the Good News of Jesus Christ to all corners of the Amazon jungle? while stating that ?all Christians have an obligation to spread the Gospel.?

After a concert at the Vatican on Oct. 2, the pope ?drew out the contrast between art and faith,? insisting that ?faith can be aided by the arts, yet faith goes beyond the realm of artistry.? A few days later, he praised the artistry of religious of the monastery of Solesmes, France, for ?their diligent prayer and labor, but especially for the most beautiful Gregorian chant, which is greatly cultivated by the monks there.?

On Oct. 3, the pope flew into Sicily where, heavily guarded, he urged the people to reject ?the lure of the Mafia? and before flying away to let them confront the Corleones among them, wished them well, or good luck, by saying, ?Courage, dear young people and families of Sicily. Be saints!?

On Oct. 6, the papal audience topic was St. Gertrude, a great German mystic and theologian who had a vision that luckily turned her away from the ?liberal studies? that she had pursued ?too avidly? to take up the ?theological sciences.? Benedict also announced his general prayer intentions for the month, ?That Catholic universities may more and more be places where, in the light of the Gospel, it is possible to experience the harmonizing unity existing between faith and reason.?

While in Sicily, Benedict tried to encourage those with a "tendency to discouragement, to resignation ... who think that in the face of evil, often profound evil, nothing can be done.?"

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During the first week of October. amid all the urging to read the bible and preach the Gospel -- the Cliché Congregation?s efforts to make life around the Vatican seem sunny and serene, there wasn't much talk about doing something about what many Catholics believe is the profound evil of the sex abuse crisis.

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