

Vatican misdirection, the relevance of the pope, Iraq and Sudan

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 12, 2010 All Things Catholic

Magicians understand that playing on an audience's expectations is the heart of making a trick work. When people think they know what's going to happen, where their attention ought to be focused, a little misdirection is usually all it takes.

Making sense of current events, just like catching on to a trick, has a lot to do with seeing past expectations. When a priori assumptions cloud one's perceptions, it's easy to miss what actually happens.

The past week brought two good examples of misdirection, albeit largely unintentional, vis-à-vis the Vatican. Diagnosing how the trick was pulled is important to an accurate understanding of what's going on.

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On Monday, headlines made the rounds proclaiming that Pope Benedict XVI has "summoned" the cardinals of the world to Rome for a "summit" on the sexual abuse crisis. One Irish report -- where the media are, understandably, highly attentive for breaking news on the sex abuse front -- billed these as "unprecedented talks."

The problem is that none of the above is true.

First, Benedict XVI has not "summoned" the cardinals for talks on anything. The reason the cardinals will gather in Rome next week is for a Nov. 20 consistory, the event in which the pope inducts new members into the College of Cardinals. (In this case, there are 24 new cardinals, including 20 under the age of 80 and thus eligible to vote for the next pope). By custom, all the world's cardinals converge on Rome to welcome new members of the church's most exclusive club.

Second, there's no "summit" on the sex abuse crisis or anything else. Under Pope John Paul II, the Vatican began scheduling a business meeting for the cardinals the day before a consistory, on the grounds that it was really the only time other than the death of a pope that they're all together. In this case, Nov. 19 has been set aside as a "day of prayer and reflection," which will feature brief discussions on five topics:

- "The situation of religious freedom in the world and new challenges," to be led by the Vatican's Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone.
- "The liturgy in the life of the church today," led by the prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Spanish Cardinal Antonio Cañizares Llovera.
- "Ten Years from *Dominus Iesus*," an August 2000 declaration from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which dealt with the relationship between Christianity and other religions. That session will be led by Italian Cardinal-elect Angelo Amato, currently the prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. While serving as the number two official in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Amato was a principal author of *Dominus Iesus*.
- "The response of the church to cases of sexual abuse," led by American Cardinal William Levada,

Ratzinger's successor as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

- The recent apostolic constitution *Anglicanorum coetibus*, which provides for the creation of new structures, called "personal ordinariates," for former Anglicans wishing to join the Catholic church. That session will also be led by Levada.

The last three topics are scheduled for the afternoon, beginning at 5:00 pm Rome time and presumably ending around 7:00 pm or so. What that means is that the cardinals will talk about the sex abuse crisis for maybe 45 minutes to an hour, and most of that time will be consumed by a report from Levada.

To call that a "summit" -- and even more, to expect any dramatic new policy or gesture to result from it -- is highly exaggerated.

Finally, there's nothing "unprecedented" about the idea of the cardinals gathering to discuss issues facing the church. This may be the first time the sexual abuse crisis has formally been on the agenda, but that's a precedent only in the technical sense. This is hardly the first time cardinals have been forced to grapple with the crisis.

Bottom line: It's misleading to over-hype the importance of next week's gathering, creating expectations unlikely to be fulfilled.

It would also, by the way, be unfortunate to let the other topics be blotted out of the sky. As critical as the crisis inarguably is, questions such as the relationship of Catholicism with the other religions of the world, or the struggle for religious freedom in the early 21st century, also deserve their moment in the sun.

If you're among the shrinking and embattled Christian population of Iraq, for example, you might think that a tight focus on the sex abuse crisis to the exclusion of religious freedom is another example of the Western media imposing an agenda, to the detriment of their own life-and-death struggles. That, at least, is something worth thinking about.

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The second case came with Pope Benedict XVI's Nov. 6-7 trip to Spain, which took the pontiff to the traditional pilgrimage site of Santiago de Compostela as well as to Barcelona, where he consecrated the Sagrada Família (Holy Family) basilica designed by famed Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí.

The massive basilica, with its multiple spires shooting into the sky, now dominates the skyline of Barcelona. It's something of a metaphor for Catholicism itself -- begun in 1882 with ambitions that outstripped its resources, the basilica seems to be forever a work in progress. At the moment it's not scheduled to be complete until 2026, the centennial of Gaudí's death, and one has the sense that, like the church writ large, something will always remain undone.

Benedict's outing was the second in what will soon be three trips to Spain by this pope, after World Youth Day in Madrid next August. That will make Spain the most-visited nation by Benedict XVI, perhaps reflecting the fact that Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has become the bogeyman of the European Catholic imagination -- an avatar of secularism on steroids who has done battle with the Catholic church on every imaginable front, from fast-track divorce to abortion to gay marriage.

Here's one proof of how Zapatero has become a Vatican metaphor: When Barack Obama was elected President of the United States in 2008, the immediate discussion in Rome was whether he would prove to be a "global Zapatero," i.e., a radical secularist backed by superpower status.

To the extent there was a headline from Benedict's Spanish outing last weekend, it was a papal reference to

"aggressive secularism," which pretty much everyone took as an implied criticism of Zapatero and the liberal social policies his government has pursued.

That's an understandable reading, especially given the expectations most observers brought into the trip. The only problem is that it's not actually what Benedict said.

Here's the full text of the exchange with reporters aboard the papal plane which prompted the reference to "aggressive secularism":

Question: In these months, a new dicastery for 'New Evangelization' is taking shape. Many have asked if Spain, with the development of secularization and the drop-off in religious practice, is one of the countries you had in mind as an objective for the new dicastery, if not in fact the principal objective. This is our question.

Benedict XVI: With this dicastery, I actually thought about the whole world because the novelty of modern thought, the difficulty of thinking in the concepts of Scripture and of theology, is universal. Naturally, there's a center to this problem and it's the Western world with its secularism, its laicism, and the continuity of the faith, which must seek to renew itself in order to be a faith for today and to respond to the challenge of laicism.

In the West, all the great nations have their own way of living this problem: We've had, for example, the trips to France, to the Czech Republic, to the United Kingdom, where [this problem] is present in a specific way for each country, for each history, and this is also true in a strong way for Spain.

Spain has always been an "originator" country for the faith. One thinks, for example, of the rebirth of Catholicism in the modern era which was above all thanks to Spain. Figures such as Ignatius of Loyola, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross truly renewed Catholicism, and formed the physiognomy of modern Catholicism. But it's equally true that a laicism was born in Spain, an anti-clericalism, a strong and aggressive secularism, such as we saw in the 1930s. This dispute, perhaps even more this conflict between the faith and modernity, both of which are very much alive, is also unfolding in Spain today.

For this reason, the future of the faith and the encounter -- not the conflict, but the encounter between faith and laicism -- is a central point in Spanish culture. In this sense, I thought of all the great nations of the West, but above all of Spain.

Two points are worth pulling out of that response.

First, the pope's language about anti-clericalism and "aggressive secularism" referred in the first place to the Spain of the 1930s, and its bloody civil war between the militant national Catholicism of Franco and the radical anti-clericalism of the Republicans. It wasn't directly a poke at Zapatero or the contemporary Socialist party, even if the pope did concede that the collision between faith and modernity continues today.

Second, the point Benedict actually wanted to make was the importance of transforming the "conflict" between faith and modernity into an "encounter." He extended that message once he landed in Spain, vowing that the church wants to work with Spanish society to promote "justice for all, beginning with the poorest and most defenseless." Reaching out to secularists who prize choice and tolerance, Benedict insisted that God is "the foundation and apex of our freedom, not its opponent."

In other words, Benedict did not come to Spain to pick a fight with the secularists, but to try to make peace. Surely that's a news story too, even if it's not the one some might have expected.

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On another matter: It probably isn't the first time, and it likely won't be the last, but there was a clear case in recent days of Garry Wills and *Forbes* magazine obviously not being on the same page.

Wills, of course, is arguably America's most distinguished presidential historian, an emeritus professor at Northwestern, and a cradle Catholic who in the last decade has published a dozen books on religious topics -- including, famously, some forceful criticism of the institutional Catholic church and its hierarchical leadership.

Wills recently gave a typically provocative interview to the magazine section of *The New York Times*, covering a wide variety of topics. Though Wills is normally voluble, he became notably succinct when asked his opinion of Pope Benedict XVI.

His one-word judgment was "irrelevant."

Whatever one makes of that, it clearly isn't the judgment over at *Forbes*. In their annual rundown of the world's most powerful people, Benedict XVI finished in fifth place -- by far the highest ranking for any religious leader on the planet. (The Dali Lama, the only other formal religious authority on the list, was way down in 39th place. Of course, even that assessment has to do with the personal charisma of this Dali Lama, not the power of the office, whereas one has the sense that any pope would probably be somewhere in the mix.)

According to *Forbes*, the only people on the face of the earth with more influence than Benedict XVI are Hu Jintao, the President of China; Barack Obama, President of the United States; Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al Saud, the King of Saudi Arabia; and Vladimir Putin, the Prime Minister of Russia.

To be fair to Wills, he didn't mean the pope is feckless in terms of Realpolitik. When pressed to explain his one-word answer, Wills added that in his opinion, the pope is irrelevant "to religion [and] to the Gospel."

Still, it's striking that a lifelong Catholic would call the pope "irrelevant," while a secular business magazine that doesn't have a dog in intra-Catholic fights regards the pope as, by far, the most powerful religious figure on earth -- not to mention more influential than his fellow German, Chancellor Angela Merkel, as well as the likes of Bill Gates and Rupert Murdoch.

Perhaps the contrast can be explained this way: Wills was engaging in armchair theology, while *Forbes* was doing journalism. A pope may be irrelevant to someone's belief system, but in terms of how power is exercised in the real world, popes obviously matter. If you don't believe that, there are some former Soviet kingpins in Warsaw and Moscow you might want to consult about whether John Paul II made a difference in their lives.

In that descriptive sense, *Forbes* probably got it about right. The assessment brings to mind that old line from Spiderman: "With great power comes great responsibility."

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Speaking of Iraq, a defense ministry official has reported that in just the last few days, thirteen bombs and two mortar attacks have targeted Christian shops and homes, leaving at least six people dead. Those acts come in the wake of an Oct. 31 assault on a Syrian Catholic church in Baghdad by forces linked to Al-Qaeda, which left scores of Christians dead, including three priests, following a police raid.

Syrian Catholic Archbishop Athanase Matti Shaba Matoka of Iraq has called on the international community to come to the aid of the country's terrified Christian population -- a population, by the way, which has shrunk from 1.5 million to 400,000 since the first Gulf War in 1991.

On Wednesday night, Archbishop Thomas Collins of Toronto led a prayer service at St. Michael Cathedral in response to the Oct. 31 attack, which obviously has become even more relevant in light of the events of the past week. Collins was a member of the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, which heard repeated warnings about the dramatic situation in Iraq.

"This unspeakable terrorist attack reminds us of the dangers that Christians face merely worshipping at their own churches in places like Iraq," Collins said on Wednesday. "We must continue to speak out against these inhumane acts and ensure that the voices lost will not be forgotten. We gather in prayer and peace to pray for those who have died, and for those who mourn them. We offer our prayers and support for those who have unjustly been forced to flee the region."

"Most importantly, we express our prayerful solidarity with the Christians of the Middle East, whose communities have been living there for almost 2000 years, immensely contributing to their society. With our united support, may they survive and flourish in the years to come, despite the sufferings which they courageously endure."

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One other note of global solidarity: The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sudan recently issued an appeal to SECAM, which is the umbrella group for all African bishops' conferences. In truth, it's an appeal that ought to be heard by the entire church, perhaps especially Catholics in the West with the capacity to cajole their governments to act.

Sudan is a country of 42 million, divided between an overwhelmingly Muslim north and a mixed population in the south, which includes a sizeable Christian community. The people of the south are scheduled to vote in a referendum on January 9, 2011, as to whether they wish to exercise the right to self-determination guaranteed by a 2005 peace agreement designed to resolve Sudan's long-running civil war.

The bishops are appealing for help in ensuring that the referendum comes off as planned, and that it's free and fair. In their view, the five years since the peace deal have not addressed the root causes of the conflict, which they identify as:

- The failure to achieve a national identity and the unity of Sudan that guarantees and protects the fundamental rights of the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society of the Sudan.
- The highly centralized system of government controlled by small ethnic group which has imposed its system of administration on the whole country through Islamization of the laws, institutions and political systems.

The worry is that the current government of Sudan, dominated by the Muslim north, lacks a vested interest in making sure that the referendum truly reflects popular sentiment in the south.

While the future of Sudan is obviously something for the Sudanese to work out, but they need to know that the rest of the world is watching, and that the international community is willing to play a role in ensuring that peace holds.

That, too, is something that Catholics might want to consider -- whether they're cardinals arriving in Rome, or just ordinary folk in the pews.

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