

Trying to make a papal gamble on evangelization pay off

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 14, 2010 NCR Today

ROME -- Popes, like musical composers, tend to weave certain major and minor themes throughout their body of work. If you want to know which compositions they regard as turning points, therefore, look for the ones where they step outside their own skin -- breaking with the instincts of a lifetime in order to accomplish something new.

For instance, when Benedict XVI stood next to a Muslim mufti for a moment of silent prayer in Istanbul's Blue Mosque in 2006 -- despite his longstanding theological reservations about interreligious prayer -- it offered a clear signal of his commitment to Islamic/Catholic reconciliation, which was especially crucial in the wake of his Regensburg address just two months before.

By the same logic, Benedict XVI's decision earlier this year to create a "Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization" also would have to rank as a carefully considered roll of the dice, because this is hardly a pope enchanted by bureaucracy.

As a cardinal, Joseph Ratzinger famously said that the German bishops' conference failed to resist Nazism more courageously because it was "too bureaucratic," and that resistance to self-preserving institutions has been a constant refrain in his thinking. In 1988's *New Song for the Lord*, Ratzinger wrote: "In the past two decades an excessive amount of institutionalization has come about in the church, which is alarming. Future reforms should therefore aim not at the creation of yet more institutions, but at their reduction."

More pointedly still, Ratzinger delivered a 1990 address to the annual gathering of Communion and Liberation in Rimini, Italy, in which he said: "After the Council we created many new structures, and we're still creating them. I've suggested an examination of conscience that could also profitably be extended to the Roman Curia, in the sense of evaluating whether all the dicasteries that exist today are really necessary." [Dicastery is the technical term for the various offices and departments of the Vatican.]

It's thus striking that this pope, of all people, should be the one to further expand the structures of the Vatican -- adding a twelfth pontifical council to join nine congregations, three tribunals, and a slew of other offices.

The "Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization" aims to revive the missionary energies of the church, above all in ultra-secular Europe. Perhaps if Henry IV could say that Paris is worth a Mass, Benedict's calculus is that Europe is worth a dicastery.

(By the way, Benedict XVI may be willing to suspend his misgivings about ecclesiastical apparatchiks because of what's at stake, but that doesn't mean everyone else is yet on board. At the moment there's no American priest working in the new council, because those American bishops who have been asked to release one so far have said no.)

The man Benedict tapped to lead the new council is Archbishop Salvatore (Rino) Fisichella, a 59-year-old Italian prelate and former rector of the Lateran University, whose last job was as the controversial President of

the Vatican's Academy for Life.

When the appointment was first announced over the summer, some Roman insiders took it as a face-saving way of lifting Fisichella out of an untenable situation at the academy, where he had only been in charge since June 2008. A year and a half ago, Fisichella distanced himself from a Brazilian bishop who had announced excommunications for the mother and doctors of a nine-year-old rape victim who underwent an abortion. The impression among some pro-life activists was that Fisichella threw the bishop under the bus in order to score PR points, and several members of his own academy openly campaigned for his ouster.

Yet given Benedict's antipathy to bureaucracy, it seems improbable he would create an entire new department just to spare Fisichella's feelings. (In Rome, there are less costly ways of *promuovere per rimuovere*, meaning 'to promote in order to remove.')

Moreover, Benedict and Fisichella have a history of friendship, making this one of those papal 'comfort zone' appointments. The two men were among the key contributors to John Paul II's 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, so much so that the joke around Rome was that it should have been called *Fisichella et Ratzinger*.

Fisichella now faces the challenge of making the pope's gamble pay off, proving that creating a new Vatican department actually can have some bearing on the church's evangelical fortunes in the 21st century. He sat down with *NCR* in his new Vatican office on Dec. 11 to discuss where things stand in the new council, and where they're going.

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How are things with your new office?

I'm more and more aware of the great expectations among many bishops and many faithful. I'm also enthusiastic because this is a job that corresponds with my twenty years of experience as a teacher. At the Lateran University, I taught fundamental theology, and in terms of apologetics I focused on presenting Christianity today using a new language.

It's only been two months, because it was Oct. 12 that we presented the document creating the dicastery in the Vatican Press Office. In just two months, I have to say that we've been able to accomplish several important things. To begin with, we've brought in four officials for the various languages - French, Spanish, Polish and German.

You're missing English.

Right, we're missing English, and also Italian. I think we'll find them soon.

I have to say that in terms of English, I'm a little disappointed because the various requests I made of bishops in the United States so far have found the doors closed. I asked for priests that I've known for a while, and, of course, these are talented priests with important responsibilities, and their bishops don't want to let them go. I can certainly understand that a bishop would think twice before releasing a great priest who does a lot of good in the diocese. On the other hand, I also think that a talented priest can also do a lot of good in service to the whole church.

Fortunately, I have a number of friends among the American bishops, and I'm convinced we can find someone. It's important to me to have an American priest in the office. It's fundamental, because we need someone who knows the situation in the United States well.

When you're finished, how big will your staff be?

We'll be a small group, because considering all the officials, the administrative personnel, and the superiors ? president, secretary, under-secretary ? we're talking about maybe 15 people. It's the number which, for the moment, corresponds to the work we have to do. I don't think the staff ought to be any bigger, because the risk would be to have more people than we need. You can't just fill up a new office without knowing what its future work is going to be. You have to do it ?step by step.?

Talk about that future work.

For around twenty-five years, Pope John Paul II talked about a ?new evangelization.? That stimulated a real movement in the church, both of action and of thought. There are lots of groups these days which were born with the aim of new evangelization. Our first aim, therefore, has to be to get to know what's happening, and maybe coordinate it a little bit. We have to educate ourselves about what's already present in the various churches.

To give you just one example, the cardinal of Washington, Cardinal [Donald] Wuerl, in September devoted an entire pastoral letter to the new evangelization. Bishops, movements, and so on, already have this commitment.

What I'd like to try to help the church understand is that in a cultural situation such as ours, which is terribly fragmented, it's not possible to advance the theme of a ?new evangelization? in a fragmented way. We have to foster unity in complementarity, offering a unified witness while preserving the uniqueness of every group, every association, every religious order. ?New evangelization? can't be the same in every corner of the world, because the cultural conditions in Europe aren't the same as Latin America, they aren't the same as the United States or Canada, and they aren't the same in Australia, or in the great cities of India or Korea. We have to try to have a unitary vision, but with respect for the different situations, traditions and cultures in which we're inserted.

Beyond developing a deeper sense of what's already happening, what projects are you considering?

One first step is that after Christmas, we'll have a conference with several specialists to clarify the concept of the ?new evangelization.? What I want to stress is taking away the ambiguity, with the risk of treating the idea of ?new evangelization? as an abstract formula. We have to be able to fill up the expression ?new evangelization? with content. We'll have two days of study devoted to the theme of the ?new evangelization,? sometime in March ? we're still considering the exact dates. We're still putting together the program, but will be just specialists, in order to make it a bit like a graduate seminar. We'll have some bishops, some lay experts, so that we can evaluate the historical, theological and pastoral horizons of what lies behind the expression ?new evangelization.?

You know the United States fairly well, having taught there on various occasions. Do you believe there's a specific contribution the United States can make to the new evangelization?

Absolutely, yes. I've always seen the church in the United States as extremely dynamic. Every time that I go to the United States, and I talk with many friends I have there, I'm aware of how dynamic it really is.

When it comes to evangelization, I think there are two poles: ad intra and ad extra, meaning the church's internal life and its broader social contribution.

I was very pleased in this regard by the pastoral letter of Cardinal Wuerl on the new evangelization, because apart from his use of that phrase, there was a very strong attention to the internal life of the church ? a sort of ad extra attention, focused on promoting the maturity of Christian life and thereby trying to overcome the crisis that's been lived in the United States.

I'm sure you already know this, but for us it's been a very positive sign to see that the North American College this year has 230 seminarians. That's a larger number than has been seen in a long time. This means that, inevitably, there's a very active and dynamic life inside the Catholic community in the United States, because vocations are born when there's dynamic pastoral activity inside the community.

There's also the ad extra dimension, meaning the presence of a Catholic community that acts within the larger society. That includes, of course, providing orientation on moral questions, usually an orientation that isn't really specifically Catholic, but is also shared by other Christian churches and other religions. But there's also Catholic presence in America in university formation, for example, and in health care, in social works and charitable assistance. It's a presence that makes the proclamation of the church visible. That's important, because the Christian proclamation has to be made visible through witness.

I would say there's also a significant presence of the church within debates over the great questions that determine the life of the society. The U.S. bishops have played an active role, for example, when American society took up several critically important questions – embryonic stem cell research, for example, and the rights of conscience, and the defense of human life from conception to natural end.

I also think that American Catholics take their membership in the Catholic church more seriously, or at least think more seriously about it, because they're regularly confronted with people who belong to other churches and other faiths. Beyond just being American, which church you belong to becomes an important sign of identity.

Can that American dynamism be exported to other parts of the world, or is it tied to the peculiarities of our history?

There are certain customs and forms of American Catholic life that can't just be replicated elsewhere. Let me give a small example, in this case from priestly life. In Italy, for example, we have lots of small towns which are basically completely Catholic. Inevitably, the relationship with the priest isn't just from 8:00 am to Noon, and then 2 to 6:00 pm. It's a lot more natural. In the United States, pastoral work is often a lot more structured and organized.

Regarding the church's presence in the society, however, and the dynamism of formation, there certainly is something to learn from the United States.

What other projects do you have in the pipeline?

The most important project is to work with the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, because in 2010 there will be a synod dedicated to the "New Evangelization" and the transmission of the faith. It would be a little arrogant for our new office to anticipate what needs to be a contribution that comes from all the bishops, and the Apostolic Exhortation of the pope.

On these matters, it takes wisdom and it also takes humility. Wisdom tells us to live this moment of preparation without being tempted to produce initiatives solely in order to prove that we exist. Humility tells us to find out what's already being done, and then to listen to the bishops in the synod – the bishops, after all, who have the primary responsibility.

I know there's a risk of creating the impression that we're not putting out any documents, but frankly I think that's a positive thing. Basically, this is a time for laying the foundations. When you do that well, you know the construction will be more stable. Until 2012, therefore, we'll be focusing on the capacity to understand and to listen. We'll be proposing some things, of course, in collaboration with other offices, but the priority will be to

collaborate with the secretariat of the synod to prepare that event well.

Let me ask you something more philosophical. Looking around, many progressive Catholics today argue that our problems with evangelization have to do, in part, with a failure to fully implement the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Traditional Catholics, on the other hand, often say that people aren't attracted to the church because it's lost its way due to reforms that went too far. What do you think?

I don't think the church should be afraid to make an examination of conscience with regard to both the criticisms you mention, because both could have some merit. Obviously, the very fact of calling what we're doing the "new evangelization" implies that what came before was missing something.

I would say that for progressives and conservatives both, the speech of Pope John XXIII at the beginning of the council, which was taken back up by Paul VI at the close, remains fundamental. John XXIII said that what has always been believed will not be changed, but the situation facing the world has changed, and the church is obliged to use a new language. When I say "language," I don't just mean words, but all the instruments through which we communicate.

Let me give you an example that I've recently been studying. In 1990, John Paul II wrote the encyclical *Redemptoris missio*. Ten years pass, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is obliged to publish *Dominus Iesus*. If you compare the two documents, you'll find that all the problems taken up in *Dominus Iesus* were already present in *Redemptoris missio*. In other words, the teaching of the encyclical wasn't fully received in the life of the church.

We often find ourselves in that situation, and we have to ask, why wasn't the teaching received? Maybe it's because the language wasn't understood, or the treatment of the theme was either ahead or behind the times. Problems of reception are real, they happen in the church as they do in the society, and it's always been that way. Augustine had them, as did Ambrose.

One could think it's a bit of a paradox that Benedict XVI seems so committed to evangelization, yet he's presiding over a Vatican that has chronic communication problems. How do you reconcile those two things

If you read the recent book *Light of the World*, you'll find that the pope himself says, yes, we have to admit there's been a problem of communication. I believe that among other things, this reflects the need for better coordination among ourselves, among the dicasteries. Maybe we need periodic opportunities to see one another, to communicate with one another, about our various initiatives.

It's comparable to what happens in secular governments, with a council of ministers which meets with great frequency. The decisions of the government are made in a participatory fashion, because they work as one group. Of course, that's not say everything always works the way it should, because there are always personal quirks that can come to light, but certainly there's a need for better collaboration and communication among the various dicasteries.

Do you believe that's going to happen?

Well, take the case of the foundation of this office. The announcement was made on October 12, and on November 12, there was an inter-dicasterial meeting in which I presented the new dicastery to everyone, and they all had a chance to talk about it.

These meetings don't happen very often.

What I hope, and what I think, is that by way of comparison to councils of ministers, more frequent inter-dicasterial meetings in the Vatican would promote greater coordination and collaboration .

The charge could still be made: If the pope is serious about evangelization, why has he allowed all these communications meltdowns to happen?

I agree that we have to take account of the rules and the instruments of modern communications, and we can do a better job. In most ways, that's obvious. What kind of reform is needed will be evaluated and decided upon by those who have the responsibility. My role is to try to see that the Council for the New Evangelization contributes to communications in the ways that pertain to us. If I try to take up bigger questions that don't belong to me, it wouldn't be helpful.

The pope may have a compelling message for the contemporary world, but all the world typically sees are the debacles ? Williamson, the sex abuse crisis, the recent confusion over his words on condoms, and so on. Is a better communications strategy actually a necessary precondition for evangelization?

Yes, but I also would not want to confuse the two things. Evangelization isn't determined by the Williamson case, or the sexual abuse crisis, or the condoms controversy. They can be a challenge to evangelization, because they usually involve taking one piece of the picture and treating it as the whole, which actually flirts with a kind of fundamentalism. You have to ask if this kind of manipulation is due to a lack of coordination in the Vatican, or whether there's actually an intention [in the media] to give a distorted impression of the life of the church.

Couldn't it be both?

Probably the lack of the former ends up favoring the latter.

You recently presented the pope's book-length interview to the press. Aside from the uproar over condoms, do you see the book as a model for the new evangelization?

I said at the time that to me, the book is like the pope opening the doors of his apartment, asking you to sit down and having a chat. That's the sensation I had. Because I had to present the book, I read it in the original language, and as I read it I thought I could sense the personal tone of the pope.

When we finished the press conference, we went to see the pope to present the volumes. Since I was the only bishop there, I was the first person to greet the pope, and I said, "Holy Father, thank you, because this is truly an instrument for the new evangelization." I'm convinced of that. There's such a richness of spirituality in it ? he talks about the value of sexuality, of love, of joy, of hope. There are so many elements that reflect the desires of people today, and he talks about them in such a simple way. It's not just readily comprehensible, but it's also full of consolation, and it's maybe also a stimulus to become interested in Christianity, beyond the scandals and stains which sometimes mar it.

It's too bad that if you read only the newspapers, the only thing you'd know about the book was a few phrases on condoms. On the other hand, perhaps all the attention will prompt some people to find out what the pope actually said!

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