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'Sex abuse is the Catholic 9/11'

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

ROME -- Massimo Franco is a veteran journalist who writes for *Corriere della Sera*, the most prestigious daily newspaper in Italy. Recently he published a book titled *C'era Una Volta un Vaticano* ('Once Upon a Time, there was a Vatican?'), arguing that underneath the PR meltdowns and internal crises of the Vatican under Benedict XVI lies a radical historical shift -- from the Vatican as the chaplain of the West, to the Vatican as representative of a minority subculture.

For centuries, he argues, the Vatican thought and acted like the representative of a cultural majority in the West -- a mentality forged in the era of Christendom, and given new life during the Cold War, when the Vatican and the great Western powers were fundamentally on the same page. It's no longer adequate to the changed cultural landscape of the 21st century, he says -- and the inability of senior Vatican personnel to adapt to this new world is the fundamental force, he argues, beneath their apparent disorientation.

My essay on Franco's book can be found here: **Diagnosing the 'implosion' of Benedict's Vatican**

Francisco sat down March 1 for an interview to discuss the trials and tribulations of Benedict's papacy.

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Your book seems stronger on diagnosis than cure. You make a convincing case that the Vatican hasn't responded adequately to this transition from Catholicism as a majority to a minority, but you don't really explain what a Vatican able to respond to this new cultural situation would look like.

I'm not surprised by what you say, because I'm a journalist. I'm not a pope, I'm not a cardinal, I'm not an intellectual. I have to analyze the origins of this crisis, but it's not up to me to dictate the solutions.

You must have some thoughts.

I think the problem is one of intellectual categories. It's a problem of language, of being in tune with the Western world. That's not the case at the moment. The Vatican, of course, boasts of being counter-cultural, but I think sometimes that's a form of self-consolation.

Actually, I think the Vatican is right when it says that in the future, the West will have to come back to religion. The question is, which religion? Will the Vatican be there at the right moment, to respond to the questions people will be asking?

I don't have the answer, but I can say that there's a disconnection between the West and the Vatican from the point of view of language. It's not the fact that Catholics are a minority, but they are a self-referential one, not a creative one, with no capacity of expansion. That's what I fear. The risk is to circle in on yourself more and more, divorced from the external world.

How much of the church's capacity to communicate with the external world actually depends on the Vatican?

Quite a lot, I think. But it's important to say that the Vatican doesn't just have a problem with external communication ? the problem is internal as well. All the gaffes, the misunderstandings, the mistakes in recent years were not really provoked by a lack of communications skills with the outside world. That's one dimension of it, but the real problem is that inside the Vatican, the discussion is not free and wide enough.

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You think it's not as simple as reforming the communications structures.

No, it's reforming the machine inside the Vatican. I think the decisions are not considered carefully enough, or shared widely enough among the top people. The Holocaust-denying bishop case is a classic example, because it was not fundamentally a problem of external communication. It was not studied enough, not discussed enough, so the result was not just an external disaster, but also the demonstration that there isn't a real professionalism in the Vatican.

Take another example: You just can't say, as some Vatican personnel have, that pedophilia is associated with homosexuality. It's scientifically incorrect. What it shows is that there's a deep cultural confusion [in the Vatican], and they're too often backwards. You have to know a subject well before you presume to talk about it ? you can't just make it up. There's a true underestimation of what was at stake, as people were speaking out without any real preparation. It was astonishing how amateurish the reactions were, especially in the beginning.

It seems that what you're saying is that the real challenge is to have people with cultural depth in key positions, before we talk about changing structures or systems.

That's it. It's a problem of culture and of language, because language reflects culture. The problem isn't merely that you have a clear message and you can't communicate it properly. The problem is that too often, the message itself is confusing and confused.

You say that fixing all this will probably have to await another pontificate. Why?

This pontificate has been a very difficult one, because you had to reconcile the heritage of John Paul II and the end of the Cold War with the need for change. That's very difficult. Benedict XVI inherited not just the glory, but also the burden, of John Paul's pontificate. For instance, he had to take a different approach to the sexual abuse crisis. This pope has been forced to look forward and backward at the same time.

In a way, Benedict is the scapegoat of a different historical situation. John Paul II was the last pope of the Cold War, and he was profoundly a man of the Cold War. This pope was the intellectual architect of John Paul's papacy, but he's forced to act in a post-Cold War world. It's a time of transition, and I think he's paying for something for which he was not responsible. He's been overwhelmed by unresolved problems of the past.

Your book also seems to suggest that he's surrounded by a regime that's sometimes dysfunctional.

That's a result of the fact that this is a time of transition. You must not forget that this pope was already old when he was elected, and he's surrounded himself with people he trusts, but without a clear strategy for governance. The result is that some choices were not happy ones.

Here's the big picture: The problem is that the Vatican is still dominated by a culture shaped by the Cold War, but the world has changed. What the Twin Towers attacks were for the United States, the sex abuse scandals are for the church. The Twin Towers meant that American unilateralism and military hegemony were over, and the sex abuse scandals meant that the ethical uni-polarism of the Catholic church was over. The West is in crisis, from a military, technological, economic and moral point of view. Both of the two parallel empires today are learning more inward, they're weaker, and they don't collaborate with each other.

A few years ago, you wrote a book on U.S./Vatican relations. How do you see that relationship today?

First of all, the relationship has been delegated to the U.S. bishops more than being managed by the Vatican. Secondly, I have the impression that the Obama administration is not very well informed about what's going on in the Vatican. Third, I think there isn't much sympathy, or coincidence of views, on values. What I always hear from Vatican circles is that Obama doesn't have a religious worldview.

There are fewer points of convergence than in the past. Both Communism and Islamic fundamentalism once brought the U.S. and the Vatican together, but today Communism is over, and since the Vatican silently accuses the United States of having lost ground and credibility in the Islamic world, it feels it has to keep its distance. As a result, the basic building blocks of the relationship aren't there anymore.

At the outset, there was great talk of a Vatican/Obama partnership in turning a page with the Islamic world. People pointed out, for instance, that Benedict's speeches in the Holy Land in 2009 and Obama's speech in Cairo were remarkably similar.

They were similar, but the reality is that Obama is overwhelmed by American problems and Benedict is overwhelmed by Catholic problems in the West. They each have internal crises they're trying to resolve.

You have a chapter on the struggles of Christianity in the Middle East. Is there anything realistically the Vatican could do about that?

It's very difficult, because the Vatican's grip on those realities isn't so strong. They should have had a strategy long ago, because I think the decline was already very clear before the war in Iraq, and the war just accelerated it. I know they tell people to stay, but my impression is that they're saying it almost pro forma, because they know that the decision to stay today is almost heroic. There aren't any real prospects for them anymore.

Why do you think Christians in the West are so much less likely to react when other Christians are attacked than, say, Jews are when other Jews are threatened, or Muslims are when other Muslims are in trouble?

Paradoxically, there's a very deep ignorance of the Christian presence outside the West. Secondly, they tend to consider them Arabs, or Pakistanis, or Indians first, and Christians only second. Nationality, culture and race often tends to be stronger than religion.

Is it also another example of your point that Christians have not adapted to being a minority? In the West, Christians tend to take their religious identity for granted, in a way that Jews and Muslims don't. Hence the welfare of Christians in other parts of the world doesn't stir our souls in the same way.

You're right. I agree with that totally. Many delusions of Catholics, and in the Vatican, depends on this fact. They think as if they're a majority. When Benedict says we must behave as a creative minority ? which in practice often means we must behave as the Jews do ? it may seem paradoxical, but it's a valid intuition of what's going on.

John Allen is in Rome for the next week. Check back to NCRonline.org frequently for more reports and exclusive coverage.

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