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The Vatican beyond its worst days, and Rome beyond the Vatican

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Popular culture is full of misconceptions about Rome, but here are two of the most persistent: That the Vatican is exclusively defined by its worst days, and that Catholic life in Rome is exclusively defined by the Vatican.

As for the Vatican, the working assumption is that unless CNN or the Google news ticker has an item, nothing's really happening. In truth, most mainstream news outlets are interested in the Vatican only if there's a meltdown -- if a Holocaust-denying bishop has been rehabilitated, for instance, or if a new document suggesting the pope dropped the ball on the sex abuse crisis has come to light.

Such developments do merit attention, but they hardly tell the whole story. If you want to understand what the institution is all about, you have to cast a wider net.

In similar fashion, in terms of understanding Catholic life -- tracking new intellectual and spiritual trends, understanding how Catholics are bringing their faith to life (or not) in the world, identifying where the key flash points are in Catholicism today -- the Vatican isn't the only game in town. At least six other circles of life in Rome have insight to offer:

- Pontifical universities, such as the Jesuit-run Gregorian University, the Dominican-run Angelicum, and the Opus Dei-run Santa Croce
- Religious orders and their networks
- The lay movements in and around Rome, such as the Focolare and Sant'Egidio

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- The diplomatic community around the Holy See
- The Italian Catholic scene
- Rome as the crossroads of the Catholic world. (You can probably learn more about Catholicism in the United States by connecting with a sampling of the American Catholics who wash through Rome for one reason or another, for instance, than you can in almost any single location in the U.S.)

A review of events in Rome during the past few days adds up to a worthwhile exercise in hammering these points home.

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The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace under its prefect, Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, continues to keep discussion alive around Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. Feb. 24-26, the council hosted a symposium bringing together intellectuals and business people to talk about how the lofty principles of the encyclical might be translated into hard-nosed business practice.

The underlying idea is that if Catholic social teaching is to make a difference, it's got to reach the people who actually shape the global economy.

One creative idea to emerge from the symposium is for the council to craft a primer on Catholic social thought for business professionals -- a sort of Catholic version of the "Sullivan Principles", which asked corporations to apply economic pressure on South Africa to revise, and eventually end, apartheid. The aim is to generate a crisp, clear set of basic principles for bringing ethics into economic life, with demonstrable impact in the real world.

My story on the project can be found [here](#).

By all accounts, the 62-year-old Turkson continues to set a brisk pace in Justice and Peace after more than a year on the job. He's got a beguiling mix of qualities -- charming and warm, disarming most stereotypes people have of Vatican potentates; unassailably orthodox, yet not captive to the ideological categories of much Western debate; astute and articulate; and refreshingly unbowed by PC taboos.

Though it's early days yet, it will be fascinating to track the development of Turkson's Vatican career.

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It's easy to complain about the Vatican's occasional struggles with communications, but the hard part is doing something about it. One problem with the way the question is usually phrased is that it can imply the Vatican needs to invent something new, when in fact there are plenty of good examples of effective communicators on the Catholic landscape, if a way could be found to ramp up their impact.

Rather than creating new systems and structures, perhaps the thing to do is to take a "best practices" approach, surveying what works in other arenas and building on those models.

The Pontifical Council for Social Communications took something like that tack this week in its plenary assembly. It brought in members of the communications team from the United Kingdom who worked on Pope Benedict's trip last September, which against all odds was a fairly smashing success, as well as

officials from Canada's 'Salt and Light' network, which has carved out a profile as a genuinely Catholic media operation without an ideological edge.

One hopes that the lessons of both the UK trip and 'Salt and Light' will be taken to heart -- perhaps especially the point that energy and creativity, when coupled with a positive spirit, can cover a multitude of sins.

One creative announcement to come from the plenary: the Council for Social Communications will support the creation of a new Catholic news agency in Africa, sort of an African parallel to the Union of Catholic Asian News (UCAN). Though the council doesn't have any money itself to devote to the project, it will help organizers in Africa solicit funds in Europe and the United States once a business plan is in place. (A delegation of African bishops plans to visit the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in May, and this will be one of the items on their agenda.) The idea is to foster reporting on both the church and the broader African society that's balanced, covering the continent's various conflicts and crises, but also highlighting the positive news that mainstream outlets sometimes omit.

The plenary also held long discussions around a proposed new document, which sketches the pastoral, theological, scriptural, and anthropological dimensions of communication in the church. A first draft was presented at the last plenary in 2009, and was discussed at length. It was then decided that the draft need to be shortened and presented to the next plenary this year. In 2010, a team of writers was appointed to work on the document, which will most likely be designed as a resource for all involved in church communications.

There is, of course, a bit of time-honored bureaucratic logic in the Vatican, which is that every so often an office has to produce a document, because otherwise no one will know you exist.

During the plenary assembly, a Mass was celebrated in honor of American Cardinal John Foley, the former president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, who recently stepped down as Grand Master of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher and returned to Philadelphia after being diagnosed with leukemia. Though one never knows, Foley's departure from Rome had the air of a goodbye.

Foley headed the Council for Social Communications from 1984 to 2007, and during that quarter-century it's probably fair to say that he wasn't able to resolve the structural problems that sometimes plague the Vatican's communications enterprise. Yet by the dint of his personality, he offered a warm, refreshingly honest and direct, and utterly human face for the Holy See. Over and over, colleagues from the world's media who reached out to Foley would come away saying: 'If only they could all be like him!'

Foley's way of engaging the world ought to be on that list of 'best practices' I mentioned above.

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On the subject of flashpoints, one controversy brewing in the Vatican these days centers on Caritas Internationalis, the Rome-based confederation of 165 Catholic charitable agencies around the world. Recently the Secretariat of State decided to deny the *nihil obstat*, or approval, to its secretary general, Zimbabwe-born lay woman Lesley-Anne Knight, to stand for a second term.

Knight sat down with me this week to talk about the situation, in her first interview since the news broke.

It's tempting to get bogged down in the behind-the-scenes politics, or to treat it as yet another chapter in the story of maladroit Vatican PR moves. Whatever one thinks of the merits of the case, firing a strong and articulate female leader, perhaps the most prominent lay woman representing the Catholic church in the international arena, is a tough sell for an institution already perceived as a boys' club.

In other words, even if the Vatican has legitimate concerns about the Catholic identity of Caritas, the PR question would be: Was there another way to make the point?

More deeply, however, there are two observations worth making about the Caritas controversy.

First, it's been an open secret in Vatican circles for a long time that relations between Cor Unum, the Vatican office that oversees charitable activity, and Caritas have been strained. One can partly explain that friction in terms of personal dynamics, but fundamentally there are two different visions of what a Catholic charity ought to be at work, and the current crossroads is bringing that tension to a head.

One vision, associated with Cor Unum, the Secretariat of State, and the writings of Pope Benedict XVI -- in other words, the current Vatican power structure -- sees Catholic charitable activity as an alternative to secular NGOs and civil governments.

The accent is on what's distinct about Catholic charity -- its underlying principles and its methods, its whole *modus operandi*, ought to be palpably Catholic, and its ultimate aim not merely to eliminate poverty or feed the hungry, but to bring people to Christ. That's not to say Catholic charities ought to proselytize in the sense of dangling aid only if people convert, but their Catholicity ought to be so "thick" that people are naturally drawn into the life and faith of the church. There are plenty of outfits that offer bread, but only the church can bring salvation.

Another vision, associated with many of the members of the Caritas confederation and the church's broader peace-and-justice network, sees Catholic charitable activity more as a partner with NGOs, governments, and other groups. The idea is that Catholic groups ought to enter humbly into alliances with all people of good will, on a basis of equality and tolerance, to pursue shared humanitarian objectives.

That doesn't mean hiding one's Catholic character, but it does imply emphasizing shared values rather than accenting points of division. It also means being careful about anything that smacks of explicit invitation to conversion, so that outsiders don't suspect a hidden agenda. Feeding the hungry and serving the poor is already building the Kingdom of God.

To be clear, these two visions are not contradictory. Alternatives can work cooperatively with one another, and partners can have contrasting identities. Yet they are nevertheless different: The "alternative" model accents those things that make Catholic charities different, while the "partner" model emphasizes what Catholic charities have in common with other groups.

The shifting of the plates underneath the decision on Knight would seem to be realignment in favor of the "alternative" rather than "partner" model.

Second, one point Knight made in our interview supplies a new piece of a much bigger picture. Some Caritas members, she said, are worried about what the eventual fallout from the Vatican decision may be, and have decided to withhold payment of their membership fees until they know what's going on.

The suggestion seemed to be that over time, some Caritas members who are more in tune with the "partnership" model could decide that they're better off on their own, rather than being formally part of the Caritas network or even the institutional church. (To be clear, Knight doesn't want that to happen; she's keenly committed to preventing it.)

For those who have been following Catholic affairs, the prospect of some Catholic charities throwing in the towel on formal institutional sponsorship bears comparison to conversations taking place in other

arenas.

Some women's religious communities in the United States upset over the current Apostolic Visitation, for example, have pondered the prospect of "going non-canonical," continuing under some other guise but not formally tied to the institutional church.

In the wake of a recent case in Phoenix in which the local bishop declared a hospital no longer Catholic, some church-affiliated hospitals and health systems find themselves asking if the challenges associated with their connection to the institutional is really worth it. Would it be easier, they ask, simply to declare themselves "in the Catholic tradition" but independent of the church?

It remains to be seen how real any of those prospects are, especially given that in each case, responsible people on both sides of the relationship seem committed to holding things together. Still, it's tough to avoid the impression that we're entering a period in which questions over Catholic identity are no longer theoretical. Increasingly, people and institutions within the church are being forced to choose.

Whether that amounts to a regrettable fracturing of Catholic unity, or a long-overdue calling of the question, may be open to debate. In any event, it seems to be the temper of the times.

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One other Vatican office where something interesting is bubbling is the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, responsible for interpreting and updating the church's Code of Canon Law. In late January, the council began to circulate a draft of revisions to the penal section of code, which governs crime and punishment in the church -- including sexual abuse by clergy.

The aim is to have a final draft ready for Benedict XVI by the end of 2012.

I spoke this week with Spanish Archbishop Juan Ignacio Arrieta, the secretary of the council, to discuss the project. My piece on the revisions can be found [here](#).

I make this point in the story, but given the sensitivities around the issue, it's worth repeating here: Revising the church's internal law is not intended to take the place of reporting acts which are also crimes under civil law to police and prosecutors. Instead, according to Arrieta, it's designed to add rigor and uniformity to the church's own internal response, and to entice bishops to use the penal law to deal with relatively minor infractions, rather than waiting for things to metastasize and require more drastic intervention.

In some ways, the interview offered another reminder of the complexities of trying to craft policy that works for the whole universal church, given both wildly different situations on the ground and clashing perspectives on which way the church ought to go.

Arrieta conceded that the sexual abuse crisis exposed a lack of coordination in terms of how the church responds to serious crimes, but he argued that wasn't just indifference or corruption. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) placed strong emphasis on collegiality and the role of the bishop, he noted -- a bishop isn't just "the long hand of the pope," but a successor of the apostles and a representative of Christ in his own regard.

When the Vatican got around to translating the theological vision of Vatican II into the Code of Canon Law in 1983, the new code left tremendous discretion in the hands of the bishop to decide when and how to impose penalties, and what those penalties should be.

Now things are moving in the direction of greater uniformity, and hence less liberty for bishops to make their own calls. Some will take that as a long-overdue response to the sexual abuse crisis, while others may see it as yet another example of creeping Roman centralization and "rolling back the clock" on Vatican II. Still others might wonder if it will contribute to an erosion of the "fraternal" dimension of a bishop's relationships with his priests, turning him more into judge, jury and executioner.

Decisions have to be made, of course, but in the Catholic Church they're never easy.

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Cardinal Walter Kasper, a distinguished German theologian and the Vatican's former top official for ecumenism, delivered a talk March 3 titled "Why I am a Man of Hope." The event was sponsored by the Lay Center, a residential and educational center in Rome designed to form the next generation of lay leaders in the church, in conjunction with the center's 25th anniversary.

Known for his deep erudition, his personal graciousness, and a balanced theological outlook, Kasper has long been a hero of the movement for Christian unity, both among Catholics and the church's various dialogue partners. He served as president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity from 2001 until his retirement in 2010.

Kasper credited his parents with instilling a basic sense of optimism in him as a young man, despite the difficult circumstances of their life during and after the Second World War. (He said that although the American forces were welcomed as liberators from Nazi tyranny, they nevertheless burned his village in Swabia to the ground.)

Yet Kasper stressed that hope is different from optimism. He's a man of hope, he said, because he's a Christian, and his faith teaches him that Christ has conquered evil and death. (Kasper wryly noted that faith is considered a theological virtue, which does not mean that all theologians are virtuous -- in the same way, he said, that cardinal virtues do not mean that all cardinals are men of virtue!)

In broad strokes, Kasper's argument was that the ecumenical landscape today is not as bleak as it seems. He conceded that some Orthodox remain skeptical about Rome, and mainline Protestant churches have taken positions on ethical questions such as homosexuality which have created new fault lines, and some Pentecostals and Evangelicals are not really interested in dialogue.

Yet, Kasper insisted, we shouldn't forget how far we've come. When he was growing up, he said, he thought entering a Protestant church was a sin he should confess. As a seminarian, he was forbidden to attend Protestant lectures. Now, such strictures seem to belong to the dusty past, which is one measure of the revolution that's taken place in the short span of fifty years.

Beneath the apparent "big chill" of the moment, he argued, Christians of various denominations have built friendships which make ecumenism an "irreversible" process, however long it may take to arrive at the final goal of being able to gather around a common table.

"Ecumenism is not fundamentally a matter of documents," Kasper said. "It's a method of human and Christian relationships built on mutual trust and friendship."

Finally, Kasper urged people disenchanted with the recent lack of ecumenical progress to have faith in the capacity of the Holy Spirit to upset people's expectations.

"The Holy Spirit," he said, "is always good for a surprise."

Along the way, Kasper offered a couple of noteworthy revelations.

First, he confessed that when Pope John Paul II first asked him in 1999 to come to Rome as the secretary, or number two official, of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, he didn't want to do it. Kasper said he wrote a long letter to the pope explaining that he didn't speak Italian, didn't have any roots in Rome, and didn't know anybody there. According to Kasper, the pope's answer was, "This can be overcome."

Second, Kasper also revealed the biggest sacrifice he had to make for the ecumenical cause over the course of his career: Being forced to drink vodka while in Moscow for talks with the Russian Orthodox church. One Orthodox metropolitan, he said, even insisted that he drink vodka for breakfast -- though in that case, Kasper said, the vodka was actually fairly good, so he didn't mind so much.

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It is, I suppose, a measure of how little attention pay to church teaching that anyone could regard it as a news story that Pope Benedict XVI says the Jews are not responsible for the death of Christ.

For the record, here's the relevant line from the declaration *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65): "True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today."

That's been on the books for forty-six years, but reporters and commentators have nevertheless rushed to hail Benedict's statement as "historic." From the Vatican's point of view, perhaps, a dose of hype is a price worth paying for a bit of good PR about the pope.

Benedict's exegesis of the death of Jesus comes in the second volume of his work *Jesus of Nazareth*, which will be officially released on March 10 with an event at the Vatican. Without violating any of the embargo restrictions, I think I can safely say this: Unlike the last papal book to roll out, Benedict's interview with German journalist Peter Seewald, there's nothing on condoms or other explosive topics likely to create a global media sensation.

As a footnote, it's interesting that while Benedict XVI has repeated the church's rejection of the deicide charge against the Jews, one prominent Jewish intellectual is, in a sense, actually embracing it. Joseph Weiler, a legal scholar who's defended Italy's right to display crucifixes in school classrooms before the European Court of Human Rights, has a new book on the trial of Jesus in which he insists that "the Jews" did indeed kill Christ, and they were doing exactly what God wanted them to do -- as were the Christians in taking the message of Christ's death and resurrection to the gentile world.

My interview with Weiler can be found [here](#).

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Finally, on the subject of pontifical universities, there were two interesting events this week worth noting.

Santa Croce hosted a conference Feb. 28-March 1 on "Neuroscience and Moral Action," which was an attempt to bring three disciplines into conversation: moral philosophy and ethics, psychology, and neuroscience.

One especially interesting presentation came from University of Wisconsin psychologist Robert Enright, who's developed a school he calls "forgiveness therapy" -- using the power of forgiveness to help people

conquer their emotional battles.

A Catholic, Enright believes the church has a uniquely developed understanding of forgiveness, which could become both its calling card and its gift to the wider world. My story on his presentation is here.

The Dominican-run Angelicum is hosting a series of events throughout March and April devoted to Mother Teresa, known as "Blessed Teresa of Calcutta" following her beatification in October 2003. The first session came this morning, with a presentation by Missionaries of Charity Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk, the postulator for her sainthood cause.

Information on upcoming events in the series can be found here.

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