

'Courtyard of the Gentiles' promises boost to Catholic pride

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 18, 2011 All Things Catholic

Somewhere deep in their souls, most Catholics long to feel proud of their church and its leaders. At times, however, that sense of pride can seem all but buried under an avalanche of heartache and bad news.

Recent developments in Philadelphia, for example, have ripped open the wounds of the sexual abuse crisis, prompting a large swath of observers in the outside world to conclude that Catholicism is fatally corrupt, and even many rank-and-file Catholics to wonder why the church seems so unable to get its act together.

For Catholics eager for signs of positive energy, next week should offer a badly needed boost.

In Paris, March 24-25, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture, under the leadership of its genial and erudite president, Italian Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, will stage something called "The Courtyard of the Gentiles" -- a high-profile new forum for dialogue, rather than polemics, between believers and non-believers.

Ravasi spoke this morning at a Vatican news conference to present the event, which involves the Vatican in partnership with three prestigious institutions: the Sorbonne, UNESCO, and the Institut de France.

In effect, the "Courtyard of the Gentiles" amounts to a way for Catholicism to present the best of itself to a jaded secular world -- the intelligence of Catholic tradition, its curiosity and openness, and its drive to become what Pope Paul VI called the "sacrament of the unity of the human family."

Inspiration came from Benedict XVI's speech to Roman Curia in December 2009, when the pontiff looked back on his trip that year to the Czech Republic -- statistically, at least, the most secularized society in Europe, with the highest percentage of avowed atheists and agnostics.

Reflecting on the experience, Benedict said: "I think the church today should open a sort of 'Courtyard of the Gentiles,'" referring to the space in the ancient Jerusalem temple where non-Israelites could enter.

Ravasi and the Council for Culture took that notion and ran with it. In February, during a trial run for the "Courtyard of the Gentiles" in Bologna, Ravasi explained its spirit.

"Encounter between believers and non-believers occurs when they abandon ferocious apologetics and devastating desecrations," he said, "revealing the deep motives for both the hope of the believer and the hesitation of the agnostic."

Ravasi clearly identified the personality type of someone unsuited for such an exchange, whether a believer or not: "Someone convinced of already possessing all the answers, with the duty simply to impose them."

The March 24-25 showcase in Paris amounts to the prime-time debut of the "Courtyard of the Gentiles," meaning a major public showcase designed to draw national and international notice.

The UNESCO portion of the program will put Catholic personalities, both clerical and lay, in conversation with

political movers-and-shakers such as former Italian Prime Minister Giuliano Amato and Czech leader Pavel Fischer.

At the Sorbonne, Ravasi and other Catholic leaders will enter into conversation with top-tier secular French thinkers such as Julia Kristeva, a feminist psychoanalyst and expert in semiotics; scientist and geneticist Axel Kahn; and philosopher Bernard Bourgeois.

The event will conclude with a youth gathering in front of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, with music and dramatic performances by top-notch French artists, pitched at both believers and non-believers alike. Afterwards, the doors of the cathedral will be flung open, and for those interested, a moving experience of Catholic prayer will be offered by the ecumenical community of Taizé.

Little of this activity may penetrate the English-speaking world, since the program is almost entirely in French. (That's a logical choice, given that France is more or less the mother ship of post-modern secularism.) Across Europe, however, the "Courtyard of the Gentiles" promises to be a big deal, generating a rare spate of positive vibes about the church.

The event also throws a spotlight on Ravasi, who more often than not is himself a source of Catholic pride.

A Biblical scholar by training, Ravasi possesses intellectual chops which are the stuff of legend. He can't clear his throat without coughing up a gaggle of literary references; consider that in a ten-minute presentation of the "Courtyard of the Gentiles" back in February, he managed to cite Swedish writer Stig Dagerman, Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel, the "Spoon River Anthology" by Edgar Lee Masters, and even the Marquis de Sade, not to mention Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. (Ravasi is able to master all that material because he usually sleeps just three hours a night, devoting the rest of his twilight hours to reading great works, often in their original language.)

Despite his cerebral firepower, Ravasi generally comes off as affable and unpretentious. As I've said before, at his best Ravasi blends the mind of Ratzinger with the heart of Roncalli -- meaning the intellectual acumen of Benedict XVI and the pastoral, world-embracing optimism of Pope John XXIII.

One American advisor to the "Courtyard of the Gentiles" is Max Bonilla of the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, who serves as President of the Camartis Institute, a partner with the Pontifical Council for Culture on a project designed to foster dialogue between faith and reason in North America, called "From Sea to Shining Sea."

"The Courtyard for the Gentiles is a wonderful and exciting opportunity for sincere and open dialogue," Bonilla said. "It is a concrete demonstration by the Holy See of the deep respect the church has for non-believers."

Tentative plans call for a similar "Courtyard of the Gentiles" event in Chicago in 2013, so Americans might think of the Paris gig as a preview of coming attractions.

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Julia Kristeva, by the way, may be the answer to a question that's long clouded efforts by the Catholic church to engage non-believers: Who exactly should we be talking to?

Such dialogues can't really be focused on the popular high priests of atheism, such as Richard Dawkins or Bill Maher. Those guys are better suited to a slugfest on cable TV, since they're often just as dogmatic as the angry religious types they lampoon.

In Italy, Catholics pride themselves on close ties to a cluster of high-profile atheists, including journalist

Giuliano Ferrara, the late writer Oriana Fallaci, and political scientist and essayist Ernesto Galli della Loggia.

Collectively, such figures are known as "teo-cons," meaning cultural conservatives with close ties to the church. Because of their politics, however, these teo-cons are often more celebrated in ecclesiastical circles than in the spheres of life a dialogue with non-believers is supposed to penetrate: the academy, secular art and literature, and so on.

Kristeva, by way of contrast, is the real deal in terms of liberal, post-modern secular thought.

She's an avowed non-believer, an apostle of Freudian analysis, and a leading feminist thinker. As is often the case in France, her intellectual firepower has made her a cultural celebrity. She's so well known across Europe, in fact, that the Norwegian rock band "Kulta Beats" actually recorded a punk song called "Julia Kristeva," celebrating her reputation as a world-class shrink: "I have my shoulders, honey, and I have my head/Don't know what's stuck inside it, don't know till you have said."

Yet Kristeva is not hostile to religious belief or to the Catholic church. Bulgarian by birth, she was educated by Dominican nuns. After publishing a trilogy on her feminist heroes -- Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein and Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette -- Kristeva recently penned a 600-page book about St. Teresa of Avila, titled *Teresa, My Love*.

To be sure, the book is not standard hagiography. Among other things, Kristeva argues that Teresa exemplified a distinguishing feature of feminine reasoning -- to wit, that for women, "Thought is inseparable from carnal sensuality."

Even so, Ravasi praised Kristeva's book as "an absolutely splendid text" in an interview with *NCR* last fall.

"We can communicate with each other because we share an intellectual language, even if we have content and approaches which are completely different," Ravasi said.

In that sense, the odd-couple friendship between Ravasi and Kristeva may offer a model for positive exchange between believers and non-believers, even when they inhabit wildly different political, moral, and cultural planets.

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On another note, the "Courtyard of the Gentiles" may also offer resources for fleshing out what Pope Benedict XVI's call for a "New Evangelization" might look like in practice.

"New Evangelization" is, of course, very much the order of the day in Benedict's Vatican.

Last year the notoriously anti-bureaucratic pontiff stepped outside his own skin to create a new Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, which on March 11-12 held its first "study meeting," bringing together roughly 30 experts from various parts of the world.

Two Americans took part: Benedictine Fr. Jeremy Driscoll, who teaches liturgy and fundamental theology, dividing his time between Rome and Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon; and Maryknoll Fr. John Gorski, a veteran missionary in Latin America and a former executive secretary of the Mission Department for CELAM, the conference of bishops in Latin America.

Next October, a Synod of Bishops also will be devoted to the theme of "New Evangelization," the working document for which was presented on March 4.

One noteworthy step forward occurred during presentation of that document, which is that at long last, we have a working definition of what "New Evangelization" actually means. The secretary of the synod, Croatian

Archbishop Nikola Eterovi?, distinguished three kinds of missionary effort:

- Evangelization as a regular activity of the church, directed at practicing Catholics;
- The mission *ad gentes*, meaning the first proclamation of Christ to non-Christian persons and peoples;
- "New Evangelization," meaning outreach to baptized Catholics who have become distant from the faith.

(It's not entirely clear, by the way, this will be the official definition of "New Evangelization" when the dust settles. During the March 11-12 study meeting, word was that the new pontifical council was not really consulted in the preparation of the synod's working document -- among other things, another indication that the problem of internal communication in the Vatican hasn't been fully resolved. Nonetheless, Eterovi's way of defining "New Evangelization" at least provides a place to start.)

Defined as Eterovi? suggested, the "New Evangelization" aims to reach out to Catholics alienated from the church, and who in many cases have become effectively secularized in both thought and practice. In that sense, the "New Evangelization" is almost a sub-discipline of the broader relationship with secularism.

If the Catholic Church can open new channels of understanding with non-believers -- or so the thinking might run -- some of those non-believers who have a Catholic background may be drawn closer to the church. Opening such channels is precisely the aim of the "Courtyard of the Gentiles," making it in effect a R&D laboratory for the ways and means of a New Evangelization.

Ravasi, coincidentally, is a member of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization. One hopes that means the lessons of the "Courtyard of the Gentiles" won't be lost on the architects of the council's efforts.

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Finally, there's a sign that Benedict's push for "New Evangelization" is gaining traction in the United States. On Thursday, St. John's Seminary, which serves the Boston archdiocese, announced the launch of a Theological Institute for the New Evangelization which will offer a Master's of Theological Studies for the New Evangelization.

The institute will bring together the seminary's formation programs aimed at laity, deacons, and professed religious, meaning everybody not training for the priesthood.

A press release says the programs will provide "theological and catechetical formation for the evangelization of the modern world, marked as it is by increasing threats to the dignity and eternal vocation of the human person."

You can tell this is a quintessentially American initiative, if for no other reason than this: An Open House on March 24 promises not only an overview of the theological content of the programs, but also "ample parking."

The launch will likely be taken as good news in the offices of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization back in Rome -- where the president, Italian Archbishop Rino Fisichella, is apparently still waiting for an American bishop to release a priest to help staff the office. (European prelates joke that every Vatican office needs at least one American, not only because of the geopolitical and cultural importance of the United States, but also for a more practical reason rooted in America's reputation for technical know-how: Somebody, they say, needs to know what to do if the printer jams.)

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