

Ferment in religious life, a new American leader, and 'Vatican Insider'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 17, 2011 All Things Catholic

Absolutely no zone of church life these days is immune to hard questions about Catholic identity, reflecting the mega-trend I've dubbed "Evangelical Catholicism," premised on a robust assertion of traditional Catholic thought, speech and practice. This politics of identity is the scarlet thread that runs through a wide range of upheavals, from the Latin Mass to the new Roman Missal, from debates over the ecclesial character of Catholic hospitals and charities to theology and seminary formation.

The ferment is certainly clear in religious life. It's the basis, for instance, of a Vatican-sponsored Apostolic Visitation of women's communities in the United States. It's also why top officials of the Roman Curia this week devoted one of their rare joint meetings to a discussion of religious life, focusing mostly on matters of authority.

In the notoriously compartmentalized world of the Vatican, communication among the various departments, technically known as "dicasteries," tends to be the exception rather than the rule. One of the few formal channels comes in an "inter-dicasterial" assembly, when all the heads of the departments meet with the pope to discuss topics of special concern. The last time that happened was in November 2010, to ponder the role of the new Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization.

On Monday, Benedict XVI convened the first inter-dicasterial session of 2011. Although the Vatican did not release details of the meeting, sources told *NCR* that the subject was religious life, including discussion of three points:

- The distinction between male and female orders, which some observers say is clear in canon law but sometimes less so in the actual practice of community life.
- The distinction between religious life and the lay state, including insistence that laity who are in charge of a movement or association may not exercise formal jurisdiction over priests and religious. Movements which include clergy and religious, such as Focolare or Sant'Egidio, must have a priest responsible for those members. That point was stressed both by Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, and Cardinal Stanislaw Rylko, President of the Pontifical Council for Laity.
- The danger of emphasizing obedience to the founder of a religious order over obedience to the wider church and its teaching authority.

The Vatican's Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, addressed the third point. A key element of the subtext was the Legionaries of Christ, and what some saw as a cult of personality over the years around the order's founder, the late Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado. Since the Legionaries have been forced to acknowledge that Maciel was guilty of a wide range of offenses, including sexual abuse, one unavoidable question is whether an exaggerated notion of personal obedience to Maciel helped allow that misconduct to go unchallenged for so long.

Bertone is a Salesian, and thus himself a product of religious life. According to sources in the meeting, Bertone

stressed that religious communities should defend their own identity, but not at the expense of accountability to the church as whole.

What might come of these discussions in terms of new policy initiatives, or measures directed at specific communities, remains to be seen. If nothing else, this week's inter-dicasterial meeting offers another indication that identity concerns vis-à-vis religious life, as in every other zone of the church, are here to stay.

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There's a new leader in religious life in the United States: Capuchin Fr. John Pavlik, who was named on June 7 as Executive Director of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the main umbrella group for men's religious orders.

Pavlik is a former provincial of the Capuchin Province of St. Augustine, headquartered in Pittsburgh. It covers Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maryland, portions of southern Indiana and the District of Columbia, with responsibility for two missions in Puerto Rico and in Papua New Guinea.

Partly in jest, and partly as a matter of personal pride — after all, I'm a product of Capuchin education myself — I'm tempted to quip that the Capuchins are fast becoming the American Salesians, i.e., the go-to order for leadership, the same profile the Sons of Don Bosco enjoy in the pontificate of Benedict XVI. Two of the most influential prelates in the country are Capuchins, Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston and Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver. The chief of staff for the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine, Fr. Thomas Weinandy, is a Capuchin, and now the CMSM will be led by a Capuchin. (You'll really know they've arrived when grumbling about a "Capuchin mafia" starts circulating, the way an alleged "Salesian mafia" under Bertone is a staple of the Vatican rumor mill.)

Pavlik takes over from another Franciscan, Conventual Fr. Paul Lininger, who's served as Executive Director since 2005.

Given the realities of religious life in America, the search to fill a position such as executive director of CMSM is always something of an adventure. Theoretically it's an honor for an order to see one of its own in a high-profile post, but vocation shortages mean it's also a serious sacrifice to release someone to serve for several years outside the community. (It's even worse, of course, when a religious is appointed a bishop, since he's gone for life.) Groups such as CMSM always want somebody good, which means the price to let that person go tends to be unusually steep.

In that context, one has to admire the Franciscans, both the Conventuals and the Capuchins, for taking a hit for the team.

Born in Western Pennsylvania and ordained in 1978, Pavlik holds both an M.Div. and a Master of Arts in literature. He's served over the years in just about every leadership capacity the Capuchins have to offer, with a special focus on formation. Other areas of responsibility have included recruitment, care for aging and ill members, finances, health care, development, mission funding, and collaboration with diocesan bishops.

I reached out to the new CMSM honcho recently for a brief interview.

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Interview with Capuchin Fr. John Pavlik

June 8, 2010

NCR: How were you chosen? .

Pavlik: I've been on sabbatical this year, studying and travelling, including pilgrimages to the Holy Land and to Greece to visit sites associated with St. Paul and St. John. In the middle of all that, one of our councilors in the Capuchins sent me an e-mail from the CMSM looking for somebody to apply, and after talking to my provincial, I decided to toss in my name. To be honest, I was somewhat shocked that I was chosen, although I do have lots of experience in religious life.

At least in the early stages, I'll be on a learning curve – maybe more like a 90 degree angle! I have to see what direction we're moving as a national organization. If I can contribute anything, I hope it's a sense of excitement. I'd like to help my brothers see the ways in which God can work powerfully among us, that we're not in this for ourselves, but because we love Jesus and the Gospel.

What's your vision of religious life today?

I'm passionate about religious life. I've grown to understand that the Holy Spirit is very much alive within the church, as Catholicism comes to a new way of relating to our 21st century American society. Religious life has always been at the heart of the development of the American church, and that's still true today. I've seen it, and not simply from the perspective of the Capuchins. All you have to do is open your eyes in any diocese or region of the country, and you can see the contributions of women and men religious. Believe me, we're not here simply to wait for the last one to die to turn out the lights.

I believe religious life has vitality, but we also have to make a real commitment to it. We have to invite young people to discover our charisms. We have to give those charisms an expression which is real, not just historical. We also have to promote religious life in a way that may be a little bit bold, but which can also be reassuring to people looking for a connection – not just with the institutional church, but with the reality of God in their lives.

Where do you see that happening?

One way in which I see it clearly is in the young people who respond to effective evangelization. I do quite a bit of preaching around the country, and I see it first-hand. They're longing for an awareness of God, for beauty, for a relationship with the "holy other." I don't find young people inattentive at all. Sure, they have issues which have to be addressed, but there's nothing new in that. At some point in our lives, somebody introduced us to these realities, and now it's our job.

Religious are always out there, willing to serve in unusual or difficult places. My own province has a mission in Papua New Guinea, where the conditions are fairly primitive, and it's delightful to see people responding to the Lord there. Our brothers go to serve people and to be there for the great good God has in mind. One of the glories of religious life is that we're willing to do that sort of thing.

As executive director of CMSM, you'll have to address questions about the relationship between religious orders and the hierarchy. How do you approach that?

I've had the opportunity to collaborate with local churches in multiple dioceses. You see the glories and the struggles of our Catholic communities, their successes and their incompleteness, their sufferings (sometimes over their inner sinfulness) and their unsung heroic works. With a spirit of collaboration, we bond with each local church where we serve and we profess unity with its members, including the laity, fellow religious, and pastors, and most especially with the local bishop, the chief pastor.

Generally speaking, we provide something extra to Catholic life which wouldn't exist without us, but which belongs within the core of our Catholic faith. Local churches and religious are mutually enriched, whether we've been invited to serve in that primary Catholic institution which is the parish, or in an institution of higher

learning, or in a monastery which witnesses to a common life in Christ.

What do you see as the main challenges facing religious life?

Three come immediately to mind. First is to accept the cultural diversity of the contemporary church, to welcome it into our religious communities. That certainly includes ethnic diversity, but also other forms of cultural diversity taking place within American society. For example, the evolution of technology has a tremendous impact on how young people today are thinking and feeling. Let's delight in that, see what's good in it, and help them see how Christ becomes a part of that culture.

The second key issue for us is recruitment. We have to be looking for ways of finding the young people who can respond to this wonderful reality of religious life.

Third, we have to take care of our brothers who have served long and hard. American society generally is facing the aging of the generations which came before us, including the "great generation" of my father, who's 87 now and who went off to war and served in ways that boggle the mind, as well as the boomer generation. That same trend is unfolding in religious life. We have to care for our brothers, provide a noble way for them to live out their final years. We need to continue to incorporate them in our communities, drawing on their wisdom. There's also a challenge to find the financial resources to care for them in a way that honors them.

How does your Capuchin background shape your approach?

Perhaps what contributes most is our sense of common fraternity, our common brotherhood. I entered the novitiate in 1970, and if I've learned anything in Capuchin life, it's that we're brothers for one another. I hope I interact in the same way with my brothers from every religious community across the country. It's exciting to me to learn the charisms these guys have accepted and allowed themselves to serve. Capuchin life has taught me to delight in that.

As Executive Director of CMSM, you'll work closely with leaders in women's religious life. What are your thoughts about the Apostolic Visitation of women religious?

When I think about all the seminary visitations and the like I've been involved in over the years, I can recall that with every one of them, we worried about what might transpire. Yet in almost every case, regardless of whatever might have gotten it started, the experience itself was pastorally helpful. These reviews allowed us to reflect on how well we were living out what we had chosen to be. I suspect the same thing will be true of the visitation of women, that overall they'll find it affirming.

When I look at our women, I see so many wonderful things that they've done in and for the church, not only throughout history but also in recent years. In the long run, I believe they'll find themselves affirmed, with a new capacity to identify where God is leading them today. The women religious I've rubbed shoulders with initially were a little fearful, but there are some positive dimensions which are starting to become clearer. For one thing, I've heard a number of bishops go out of their way to affirm the women religious and to speak positively about them. From my perspective, good things can come of this experience.

How does the sexual abuse crisis affect religious life?

Because we religious are both "professed" and "professional," we represent more than ourselves. We represent the whole Church, and so we have an obligation to hold ourselves to the high standards we publicly promised. I'm convinced that even sorrow and embarrassment over our members' sins, if they're honestly owned, will lead us to a renewed asceticism that serves us well because it responds to real, not idealized, situations.

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To be honest, I've got a fairly mixed track record as a prognosticator. I once famously predicted that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger would not be elected pope, for instance, and we know how that turned out.

One recent bit of prophecy I offered, however, is looking better by the day. Back in April, when the Italian daily *La Stampa* hired Andrea Tornielli – by far, the best-connected Vatican writer in the business – I wrote that *La Stampa* was likely to become a "destination of choice" for devotees of Catholic affairs.

On Thursday, June 23, *La Stampa* will take a big step toward delivering on that promise with the launch of a new global service called "Vatican Insider," offering content in English and Spanish as well as Italian. The idea is to provide news, editorials, interviews, and analysis concerning the Vatican and the Catholic Church, as well as broader religious, ethical and theological issues, including the relations and contrasts among different religions. It can be found online at www.vaticaninsider.com.

In terms of regular contributors, *La Stampa* has assembled an Italian dream team. In addition to Tornielli, they've got Giacomo Galeazzi, a superb Vatican beat writer, and veteran correspondent and commentator Marco Tosatti, known both for great sources and a balanced perspective.

Two veteran journalists, both of whom know the States well, direct the project. One is *La Stampa*'s managing editor, Marco Bardazzi, who served from 2000 to 2009 as the U.S. correspondent for the Italian news agency ANSA. Bardazzi is part of the Communion and Liberation movement, having served as spokesperson for the annual "Meeting" in Rimini and as co-founder of the movement's "Crossroads" center in America. The other is Paolo Mastrolilli, a former U.S. correspondent for *La Stampa*. Mastrolillo likewise has strong Catholic credentials, having worked for both Vatican Radio and *L'Avvenire*, the newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference.

"Vatican Insider" will mark the first time the work of Tornielli, Galeazzi and Tosatti is available in English on a regular basis, and that alone is worth the price of admission. The service will also feature occasional contributions from other Catholic writers around the world. I'll have a piece for the June 23 launch, for instance, explaining why Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York is potentially key to the Catholic future.

"Vatican Insider" shapes up as an important new contribution to global Catholic conversation. Make a point of checking it out this Thursday.

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