

Benedict's uncle, Catholic charities, and coming attractions

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 24, 2011 All Things Catholic

Next Wednesday is the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, when archbishops appointed during the past year will be in Rome to receive their pallium. (A narrow band of woolen cloth, the pallium symbolizes the archbishop's office.) This year the event takes on extra significance as the 60th anniversary of Pope Benedict XVI's ordination to the priesthood, which took place in the Freising Cathedral in Bavaria on June 29, 1951.

As it happens, the pope isn't the only Bavarian priest celebrating his 60th anniversary. His brother Georg, 87, was ordained in the same ceremony by then-Cardinal Michael Faulhaber, along with a seminary classmate named Rupert Berger. The brothers offered their first public Masses on July 8, 1951, in St. Oswald's church in their home village of Hufschlag -- an event known as a *Doppelprimiz*, or "double first." Since concelebration was not yet normal practice, the Ratzinger brothers celebrated two separate Masses.

The scripture verse the future pope selected for his first Mass card came from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians: "We aim not to lord over your faith, but to serve your joy."

To be sure, next week won't be anything like 1996, when John Paul II celebrated the 50th anniversary of his priestly ordination. That milestone brought the book *Gift and Mystery*, and was marked by a year-long series of events that functioned as a warm-up for the Great Jubilee of 2000. Benedict's anniversary will be more low-key, though not without its festive touches.

A company called Excelsis, for instance, is marketing a new brand of cologne titled "Benedictus", made from linden blossom from Germany, frankincense from the Holy Land, and bergamot from Italy. (It would be an amusing exercise to stroll through the various pallium receptions trying to detect who's wearing the papal scent.)

In honor of Benedict's anniversary, here's an oft-overlooked tidbit from the pope's biography: He's actually not the first celebrated priest from the Ratzinger clan. That honor belongs instead to his great-uncle Georg, a towering figure in 19th century Bavarian history. (He's not to be confused with the pope's brother).

In light of Benedict's career, there are four aspects of his great-uncle's legacy which are especially interesting:

- He was a rarity in the 19th century, a priest who voluntarily laicized -- not for reason of scandal, but because he wanted to pursue a career in politics.
- He was a disciple of the progressive German theologian Johann Ignaz von Döllinger, excommunicated in 1871 for his opposition to papal infallibility.
- He was co-founder of a populist "Farmer's Party", defending the poor against 19th century robber barons.
- He reflected the anti-Semitic attitudes of his times, lending biographical subtext to Benedict's approach to Catholic/Jewish relations.

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In a 1985 anthology of Bavarian biography, Georg Ratzinger made the list of the 1,000 most important Bavarian

personalities of the past 1,500 years. Ordained to the priesthood in 1867, he studied theology at the University of Munich, where he won a prize for his dissertation on the church's care for the poor.

While at the university, Ratzinger became an assistant to Döllinger, then coming into his own as a fierce critic of the movement towards papal absolutism called "ultra-montanism." In an 1867 address, Döllinger asserted: "The papacy is based on an audacious falsification of history. A forgery in its very outset, it has, during the long years of its existence, had a pernicious influence on church and state alike."

It was Döllinger who called for the education of German theologians in state universities rather than seminaries, and who called for the German bishops to meet regularly as an antidote to Roman influence -- both trajectories, of course, which Georg Ratzinger's grand-nephew would later view with some ambivalence.

Monsignor Ratzinger requested, and received, laicization from the priesthood in 1888, in the middle of what had become a highly successful run as a politician and legislator.

Politically, Ratzinger was an apostle of the new Catholic social teaching, expressed in Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. He served in the Bavarian Landtag in 1875-78 and again in 1893-99, and in the national Reichstag from 1877-78 and 1898-99. His first term was a member of the Patriot's Party, a Catholic party launched in 1869, and his second as a deputy of a new *Bauerbund*, or "Farmers Party" he helped form in 1893.

Ratzinger's *Bauerbund* stood for a mix of populist protectionism and progressive social measures such as child labor laws and minimum wages. Its chief goal was a system of social supports that would insulate poor farmers and small traders from "boom and bust" cycles. It also supported nationalization of the school system and the abolition of Bavaria's upper house of parliament, which the nobles and the church dominated. Time and again, Ratzinger stood on the floor of the Bavarian and federal legislatures and thundered against the excesses of capitalism.

Thus when Benedict XVI denounced both Marxism and capitalism as "systems that marginalize God" in Brazil in May 2007, and took a special swipe at capitalism for failing to bridge "the distance between rich and poor" and "giving rise to a worrying degradation of personal dignity," he was to some extent building on a family legacy.

The pope's only published comment on his great-uncle came in a 1996 interview with German journalist Peter Seewald, which later became the book *Salt of the Earth*:

Question: There was a Georg Ratzinger who played a certain role in Bavarian history?

Ratzinger: He was a great-uncle of mine, my father's uncle. He was a priest and had a doctorate in theology. As a representative of the state and national assemblies, he was really a champion of the rights of the peasants and the simple people in general. He fought -- I've read this in the minutes of the state parliament -- against child labor, which at that time was still considered a scandalous, impudent position to take. He was obviously a tough man. His achievements and his political standing also made everyone proud of him.

Finally, Georg Ratzinger's political populism sometimes shaded off into anti-Semitism. In his 1975 work *Christians and Jews in Germany*, the late Israeli scholar Uriel Tal identified Ratzinger as a leading figure in shaping anti-Jewish sentiment in Catholic circles in nineteenth-century Germany.

In a well-known book on economics, Georg Ratzinger suggested that traditional German values of discipline, modesty, family integrity and Christian faith were undermined by the financial power of Jews. He expressed

similar ideas more crudely in polemical works written under pseudonyms. These included *Jüdisches Erwerbsleben: Skizzen aus dem sozial Leben der Gegenwart* (?The Jewish Life of Acquisition: Sketches from the Social Life of the Present?), published in 1892 and again in 1893 and 1894) and *Das Judentum in Bayern: Skizzen aus der Vergangenheit und Vorschläge für die Zukunft* (?Judaism in Bavaria: Sketches from the Past and Proposals for the Future?), published in 1897.

Though the pope has never said so, it's difficult to imagine that the memory of his great-uncle's record on Jews and Judaism hasn't influenced his own efforts at reconciliation.

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Last week I wrote about ferment over Catholic identity in religious orders. Another slice of ecclesial life experiencing identity tensions these days is Catholic charities, and fresh proof of the point came in an address delivered on Tuesday by Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput to the Catholic Social Workers National Association.

In typically clear fashion, Chaput laid down a marker at the outset: ?If our social work isn't deeply, confidently, and explicitly Catholic in its identity, then we should stop using the word ?Catholic,?? he said. ?It's that simple.?

Chaput warned that a ?new kind of America is emerging in the early 21st century,? one that he believes will be much less friendly to religious faith. In that milieu, he said, ?no one in Catholic social work can afford to be lukewarm about his faith.?

Specifically, Chaput insisted that Catholic charities ?have the duty to faithfully embody Catholic beliefs on marriage, the family, social justice, sexuality, abortion and other important issues.?

Chaput conceded that Catholic charities are not required to proselytize, and that there may be solid prudential reasons in given circumstances for not speaking openly about matters of faith. Moreover, he said there's no specifically Christian method of charitable work, and Catholic ministries should learn from the best the social sciences have to offer.

That said, Chaput offered nine ideals for Catholic charities:

- ?Every act of Catholic social work should function faithfully within the mission and structures of the local diocese, with special respect for the role of the bishop.?
- ?Every Catholic social ministry ? should allow for the possibility of verbally professing the Gospel, as prudence permits.?
- ?No Catholic charitable worker should ever engage in coercive proselytism.?
- ?Every Catholic social ministry should insist on the best professional skills, and should use the best professional means -- so long as those skills and means reflect the truth of Catholic moral teaching.?
- ?Catholic Charities and similar Catholic organizations should always provide opportunities for prayer for employees and volunteers.?
- ?Every Catholic social ministry should bear witness to the truth of Jesus Christ to the wider community, including the rights of the poor, the homeless, the disabled, the immigrant and the unborn child.?
- ?Every Catholic Charities organization should seek to deepen an awareness of Catholic social teaching.?
- ?Catholic social work should involve both an effective outreach to individuals struggling with poverty, and a frank critique of the structural causes of poverty through the lens of Catholic social teaching.?
- ?Catholic social ministries should welcome opportunities to work with other individuals, groups and social agencies, but also remain alert to the risk that cooperation can easily turn Catholic organizations into sub-contractors of large donors -- donors with a very different anthropology and thus very different

notions of authentic human development.?

Summing up the spirit of his address, Chaput closed with an anecdote about the Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor. As Chaput told the story, she was once at dinner with a fellow writer who waxed on about the beautiful symbolism of the Eucharist. O'Connor supposedly replied: "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it."

Such unapologetic insistence on the reality of the faith is at the heart of what I mean by "Evangelical Catholicism," a powerful current indeed in the church today, and it has few exponents more indefatigable than Chaput.

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Two recently announced summits, one in London and the other in Rome, deserve to be on the global Catholic radar screen.

Christianity in the Holy Land

July 18-19, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, will co-host a conference on the dramatic situation facing Christians in the Holy Land. Featuring representatives of the various Christian communities in Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Territories, the event will be held at Lambeth Palace, the residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Roman Catholic Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Fouad Twal, and the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, Suheil Dawani, will be on hand. They'll be flanked by bishops from North America and Europe who are part of the "Coordination of Catholic Bishops Conferences in solidarity with the Church in the Holy Land."

The idea is to bring together religious leaders, politicians and media figures to discuss how the West -- especially Christians in the West -- can offer practical help to their coreligionists in the Holy Land, in part to stem what has become a Christian exodus out of the region. To keep the conversation manageable, organizers are restricting the guest list to roughly 70-80 participants, and attendance is by invitation only.

The woes of Christianity in the land of its birth are well known. Overall, there are an estimated 12 million Christians across the Middle East, less than half of the roughly 25 million Christians in the area in the middle of the last century. Daniel Pipes, writing in the *Middle East Quarterly* a decade ago, predicted that within a relatively brief arc of time, Christians "will effectively disappear from the region as a cultural and political force."

In materials for the upcoming summit, Williams and Nichols asserted that the Christian presence is vital for "a plural and peaceful Middle East."

"Their disappearance would be catastrophic, and a shameful indictment of those of us in the West who paid insufficient attention to their cry for help," the two leaders wrote.

Among other things, organizers say the summit is designed to promote:

- "Better monitoring of realities on the ground in the media, in the political community and among policy makers."
- "More attention to Christian communities whose disappearance would have profound consequences on the map of an already dangerously radicalized region."
- "Development of materials for parishes, schools and civil society which accurately describe the present situation and options for helping to reverse current trends."

- ?Financial support for Christians in the Holy Land to assist advocacy work, pilgrimage groups, youth projects, school exchanges, diocesan, school and parish links and interfaith collaboration.?

Of course, the slow-motion decline of Christianity in the Middle East is hardly a news flash. It's been underway since the 19th century, and has been turbo-charged by the Israeli/Palestinian problem, the first and second intifada, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and the general political and economic stagnation of the region.

If this summit is to be more than yet another expression of pious concern, it will have to confront at least five thorny realities.

First is a general Western neglect of Middle Eastern Christianity outside specialized circles. French intellectual Régis Debray (a famed leftist who once fought alongside Che Guevara) has written that Christians in the Middle East are the ?blind spot? in the Western view of the world -- too religious for Western liberals, too foreign for Western conservatives.

Second, the politics of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict are a hugely complicating factor. Since the overwhelming majority of Christians in the region are Arabs, they tend to be fiercely pro-Palestinian. They often blame Israeli occupation for Christian suffering and minimize the failures of Palestinian authorities, in ways that can alienate important sectors of Christian opinion in the West -- perhaps especially in the United States. (Recall how the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East last year ended in controversy when Greek Melkite Archbishop Cyrille Bustros said Christ ?abolished? the notion of a ?Promised Land? for Jews, and thus the Bible should not be invoked to support Israel at the expense of the Palestinians.)

Third, the broader realities of Christian/Jewish and Christian/Muslim relations also get in the way. In some PC circles, it's virtually taboo to suggest that Christianity is being targeted for extinction by Muslim radicals for fear of fanning the flames of Islamophobia. Among adepts of Jewish/Christian dialogue, there's sometimes an uncritical acceptance of the Israeli mantra that Christians in Israel are better off than anywhere else in the Middle East -- despite recent polling by Bethlehem University suggesting that Christians in Israel are at least as frustrated and inclined to leave as those in the Palestinian Territories.

Fourth, the sometimes fractious state of ecumenical and even intra-confessional relations in the region is also a complication. A distressing share of Christian energy in the Middle East is siphoned off into these internecine rivalries.

Fifth, churches in the Middle East will have to come to terms with Western expectations of accountability and transparency. Veterans of relief efforts often say the problem facing Christianity in the Holy Land is not really a lack of money, because church institutions there are often well-endowed. Some longtime donors, they say, have become hesitant about upping the ante until there are assurances resources will be effectively utilized. The Middle East synod referred to this problem obliquely, saying there's a need for a clearer distinction between assets belonging to the church and assets for the personal use of church leaders.

How honestly, and creatively, the summit confronts these realities will partly determine its success or failure. I've been invited to take part, and I hope to report on the event in a future column.

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As an aside, the summit on the Holy Land illustrates one likely future for official Anglican/Catholic relations, at least in the short term.

Notoriously, developments on both sides of the relationship have created new impediments to doctrinal agreement and structural reunion, including movement towards openly gay bishops and blessing same-sex unions among some branches of the Anglican Communion, and on the Catholic side a recent decision by

Benedict XVI to create new structures to welcome Anglican defectors.

In that climate, forward motion in the relationship will likely come disproportionately in what Benedict has referred to as 'inter-cultural' dialogue. The idea is to focus on shared social, cultural and political concerns, rather than on theological differences.

Without quite spelling it out, that's precisely what Williams and Nichols are doing by joining forces in support of Christians in the Holy Land. The upshot is that Anglican/Catholic relations do have a future, if perhaps not quite the one envisioned by the pioneers of ecumenism.

Sex Abuse

Another recently announced event is set for February 6-9, 2012: A major conference at Rome's Gregorian University, co-sponsored by several Vatican departments (including the Secretariat of State and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), on combating the sexual abuse crisis.

According to Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, this will be the first 'systematic common reflection at the international level' on the crisis. The aim, he said, is to foster a 'culture of listening to victims, of prevention and reconciliation, which must be a permanent and fully integrated part of the life of the church.'

For the record, one point likely to be lost amid media hype about a 'Vatican sex abuse summit' is that the event actually began as an initiative of the Jesuits and the Gregorian. Jesuit Fr. Francois Xavier Dumortier, rector of the Greg, said in a press conference last Saturday that that since the university counts more than 2,000 seminarians, priests, and religious in its student body -- some, of course, destined to be future bishops and religious superiors -- it feels a special responsibility to help heal the 'pain and suffering' the crisis has caused 'to the victims in a deep and specific way,' as well as 'the church in the whole world.'

A website for the conference can be found here: <http://thr.unigre.it/vescovi2012/intro.aspx>

The idea, according to organizers, is to foster application of a recent set of guidelines for combating abuse issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Released May 16, that document called on bishops to focus on support for victims, creating a safe environment in the church, and cooperation with police and civil prosecutors when crimes against minors occur. The congregation has directed bishops' conferences which don't yet have policies on abuse to develop them by May 2012.

Plans for the February 2012 symposium, titled 'Toward healing and renewal,' were announced June 13. More than 200 representatives of episcopal conferences and religious communities are expected to attend, where among other things a new multi-lingual 'e-learning' center for church officials, designed to collect and promote 'best practices', will be introduced.

Details were presented in a press conference at the Gregorian on June 18 with Lombardi and Maltese Msgr. Charles Scicluna, the Vatican's chief prosecutor on sex abuse cases.

A preparatory committee is led by German Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, who heads an Institute for Psychology at the Gregorian. In 2010, Zollner and another Jesuit, Italian Fr. Giovanni Cucci, published a book on the crisis titled *The Church and Pedophilia: An Open Wound*. In it, they argued that a media-induced 'moral panic' over pedophilia, presenting old cases as new and distorting the statistical dimensions of the problem, 'doesn't help anybody.'

The conference will be held in four languages, including English. Coverage in the English-language media ought to be helped significantly by the fact that the press consultant is Alexander Des Forges, whose day job is

handling media relations for the Bishops Conference of England and Wales.

A key American contributor will be Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, a psychologist who formerly served as director of the St. Luke Institute in Silver Spring, Maryland, which treats abuser priests. (Rossetti, by the way, has a new book from Ave Maria Press titled *Why Priests are Happy: A Study of the Psychological and Spiritual Health of Priests*. Though I'm not sure this is really a selling point, I contributed the foreword.)

There also will be a series of workshops on the VIRTUS program developed in the late 1990s in the United States by the National Catholic Risk Retention Group. Its centerpiece is "Protecting God's Children", which trains clergy, religious, teachers, staff, volunteers, and parents about warning signs of abuse and ways to prevent it, as well as how to make a report and how to respond to an allegation. The program is presently in use in more than 100 dioceses across the United States.

Michael Bemi, an insurance industry veteran who's CEO of the National Catholic Risk Retention Group, told *NCR* that he hopes the Gregorian conference will spawn interest in abuse prevention and detection programs around the world. In anticipation of that, Bemi said, VIRTUS has already begun adding trainers fluent in various languages who could fan out to different parts of the globe.

The central lesson of VIRTUS, Bemi said, is that child sexual abuse is "a huge problem, but it's not insurmountable." Hard proof, he said, is that dioceses which have made a serious commitment to prevention and detection are paying out far less these days to settle claims.

In effect, the 2012 conference shapes up as a spotlight on what might be called the best of the institutional response to the crisis.

For those inclined to give the institution the benefit of the doubt, the conference will highlight the undeniable sea change in its culture. From a pattern of denial and cover-up, the church has moved aggressively "to look the sin and crime of pedophilia in the face," as Scicluna put it during a recent interview with Vatican Radio. Today, the institution in many parts of the world has become a pacesetter in abuse prevention and detection, and is officially committed to both civil and ecclesial punishment for abusers.

Those who view institutional claims through a hermeneutic of suspicion, however, are unlikely to be mollified. There's no indication that the 2012 summit will be an occasion for debating priestly celibacy or Catholic sexual morality, and no suggestion that it will mark a new system of accountability for bishops who mismanage or ignore abuse reports -- still the most persistent line of criticism from those who believe the church hasn't fully absorbed the lessons of the crisis.

As a footnote, the press conference last Saturday was noteworthy for the presence of Scicluna, the aggressive prosecutor who, in effect, represents the "tip of the spear" in the Vatican's response to the sex abuse crisis. It was Scicluna, for instance, who led the investigation into the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, which resulted in Pope Benedict XVI ordering Maciel to observe a life of prayer and penance in his final years.

A canon lawyer by training, Scicluna has a reputation for both intelligence and integrity. Given the nature of his job, Scicluna is more familiar with the details of Catholic abuse cases than anyone else on the planet. He's also highly articulate and at ease in the press culture of the Anglo-Saxon world. Among insiders, it's long been a mystery why Scicluna hasn't been more out front. By consensus, the few interviews he has given have been among the high points of the Vatican's communications efforts on the crisis.

Perhaps the 2012 event is a signal that's about to change.

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