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Finding the 'new' in Vatican news

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 20, 2012 All Things Catholic

It's my birthday today, so I guess that means I can cry if I want to. Although I'm not exactly weeping, I do find myself grousing a bit about the way recent Vatican stories have played in most news coverage.

It's Journalism 101 that to count as "news," something is supposed to be previously unknown, out of the ordinary, or not widely familiar -- i.e., "new." This is where the contrast between "dog bites man" versus "man bites dog" enters the picture.

Yet on two recent storylines out of Rome, we've seen some remarkably "dog bites man" coverage while either playing down or missing what was new.

The pope's speech

One such case is Pope Benedict XVI's Jan. 9 address to diplomats, generally the pope's top foreign policy speech of the year. Coverage in the English-language media focused on the pontiff's statement that "policies which undermine the family," interpreted as a reference to gay marriage, "threaten human dignity and the future of humanity itself."

In the same paragraph, the pope referred to marriage being between a man and a woman, so the gay marriage angle was fair game -- despite the fact that Benedict XVI never used the phrase, and despite the fact that it was hardly the main point of the speech, which ranged over the economic crisis, the environment, religious freedom and education, in addition to surveying a variety of global hotspots.

Yet assuming that focus is defensible, it's still debatable in terms of news value. After all, where would you put "pope objects to gay marriage" on the shock-o-meter?

By way of contrast, there was actually something new about the speech, a point with important consequences for the intersection of faith and politics.

In his discussion of the defense of human life, Benedict XVI cited two developments that he found encouraging in the last year:

- An October decision by the Court of Justice of the European Union banning the commercial patenting of embryonic stem cells.
- A resolution adopted in the same month by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe condemning prenatal selection on the basis of sex.

The novelty is that in both cases, political support for these moves came from the left, not the right. The legal complaint that led to the ban on patenting embryos was brought by Greenpeace, while the parliamentary resolution on prenatal selection was introduced by a Swiss socialist and feminist named Doris Stump. Needless to say, these are not exactly the fellow travelers one ordinarily associates with the political agenda of Benedict

XVI.

In effect, the pope's speech was a lesson in what Jeremy Rifkin has called "the new biopolitics," in which erstwhile enemies are suddenly on the same side.

In a growing number of biotech debates, including embryo patenting, genetic engineering and animal/human hybrids, the Catholic church and the pro-life movement find themselves allied with elements of the secular left, including environmentalists, feminists and anti-corporate activists. Their points of departure are obviously different, but they arrive at the same place. On the other side is a constellation of pro-business conservatives, the medical and scientific establishment, and libertarians opposed to any form of government regulation.

To some extent, those shifting sands remain hard to see because older bio-debates such as abortion and gay marriage still loom large. As the 21st century rolls on, however, the battle lines of the culture wars may be increasingly redefined, and the pope's speech offered proof of the point.

Now, there's something worth reporting.

The new cardinals

The other big storyline was Pope Benedict XVI's Jan. 6 announcement of 22 new cardinals, including 18 under the age of 80 and hence eligible to elect the next pope. Given that the bulk are Vatican officials (10), Italians (seven) and Europeans (13), news reports styled it as a crop reinforcing the conservative, and curial, stranglehold on the College of Cardinals.

"More Roman, Less Catholic," was one pithy header for the story.

Again, even if true, where's the news? Yet in this case, it's less true than it may seem.

First of all, this isn't likely to be a celebrated consistory on the Catholic right. This isn't the crop of November 2010, which featured conservative lions such as Cardinals Raymond Burke of the United States and Malcolm Ranjith of Sri Lanka. Instead, this group is composed mostly of ecclesial equivalents of Mitt Romney, meaning center-right pragmatists who inspire little ideological fervor.

Consider Archbishop Dominik Duka of Prague, a Dominican and a biblical scholar. Duka reportedly has called the older Latin Mass "a Baroque artifact for Baroque times" and has signaled openness to in-vitro fertilization if the destruction of embryos could be avoided. Archbishop Giuseppe Betori of Florence has tried to heal the historical divide between the progressive and conservative camps among Italian laity, and for his trouble, a traditionalist commentator has labeled Betori a "paleo-liberal," charging that he's part of a subterranean bloc of cardinals opposed to Benedict XVI. There's also Brazilian Archbishop João Bráz de Aviz at the Congregation for Religious, a friend of the Focolare who's had a good relationship through the years with the liberation theology movement in Latin America.

These guys may not be anybody's idea of a flaming liberal, but they're also not hardcore conservatives.

Second, the assumption that naming a lot of Italians and Vatican officials automatically makes the College of Cardinals more "Roman," in the sense of more insular and less in touch with the wider world, is open to question.

Take, for instance, Italian Archbishops Fernando Filoni, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, and Giuseppe Bertello, president of the government of the Vatican city-state. Both are veteran diplomats who have served all over the world. Filoni was assigned at various points to Sri Lanka, Iran, Brazil,

Jordan, Iraq and the Philippines, in addition to spending 1992-2001 in Hong Kong heading up a study mission on China. Bertello has served in Sudan, Turkey, Venezuela, Mexico, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Rwanda.

To be clear, these weren't pleasure cruises. Filoni was in Baghdad in April 2003 when the U.S.-led invasion began, while Bertello was in Rwanda in 1994 at the height of the genocide. As most Western diplomats fled, Filoni and Bertello both stayed on the job, insisting they couldn't abandon the local church or the missionaries. Both won high marks for their humanitarian and diplomatic efforts, even if both were ultimately powerless to stop the bloodshed unfolding around them.

In the abstract, is it really the case that Italians and Vatican officials such as Filoni and Bertello are bound to have a more narrow outlook than, say, a residential prelate from North America or Africa who's rarely traveled outside his comfort zone?
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If you want an actual newsflash from this consistory, Filoni and Bertello hint at the headline: "Triumph of the Diplomats."

Five of the 18 new cardinal-electors named by Benedict XVI -- notably, the first five names on the list -- come out of the Vatican diplomatic corps. In addition to Filoni and Bertello, the former diplomats include:

- Portuguese Archbishop Manuel Monteiro de Castro, now running a Vatican court, who's previously served in the Antilles, El Salvador, Honduras and South Africa;
- Spanish Archbishop Santos Abril y Castelló, who replaced Cardinal Bernard Law as Archpriest of St. Mary Major after spending much of his career in Cameroon, Bolivia, Argentina and Slovenia; and
- Italian Archbishop Antonio Maria Vegliò, currently heading the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Refugees, who's spent time in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Lebanon and Kuwait.

All this is striking in light of the traditional Vatican rivalry between the two heavyweight departments that tend to dominate the place, the Secretariat of State and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In oversimplified terms, it's a contrast between diplomats and theologians -- between outward-looking figures focused on geopolitics and dialogue, and more inward-looking figures concerned with Catholic identity and doctrinal fidelity. (In theory, of course, these two instincts can be complementary, so the tension is usually a question of where one puts the emphasis.)

The 2005 election of Benedict XVI, whose previous job had been running the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for a quarter-century, was seen as a big win for the theologians. When the new pope tapped a former aide from the doctrinal office, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, as his Secretary of State, it seemed to put a slammer on that conclusion.

In that light, the consistory of 2012 shapes up as a good day for the diplomats -- and, perhaps, for the cosmopolitan, dialogue-oriented and practical mentality long associated with the world's oldest diplomatic corps. How that plays out in practice remains to be seen, but it's at least a fresh question to ponder.

Caveat emptor

In fairness, most of what I've outlined here amounts to insider baseball, either in terms of European politics or Vatican culture. It may be unrealistic to expect nonspecialized media outlets to work this kind of stuff into their day-one stories, especially given the deadline pressures of a 24/7 news cycle.

Moreover, it's not as if journalists had much help.

Imagine, for instance, if the Vatican had organized a news conference after the pope's speech to diplomats, where representatives of Greenpeace and the socialists had said something like, "We've got a truckload of differences with the Catholic church, but on the urgency of protecting life against scientific and commercial exploitation, we're on the same page."

Or imagine if the Vatican had staged a briefing with Filoni and Bertello after their nomination as cardinals was announced, in which they could have spoken about how their experiences in Iraq and Rwanda shaped their sense of the challenges facing both the church and the wider world.

Such efforts would have given public understanding a major boost in the right direction. Needless to say, they didn't happen.

What all this suggests, perhaps, is a basic lesson in *caveat emptor*. Given the dynamics of both the media business and of Vatican communications, it's unlikely that the novel aspect of most developments out of Rome, assuming there is one, will feature in the early rounds of most reporting and commentary.

In terms of finding the "new" in Vatican news, the bottom line thus is: Let the buyer beware.

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