

## Defending Christians; Salt and Light; and who didn't cancel Christmas

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 14, 2012 All Things Catholic

Sometimes life's lessons come from the most improbable places. As it happens, Kazakhstan, a Central Asian republic with a grand total of 250,000 Catholics -- roughly the same as the Diocese of Peoria, Ill. -- may have something to teach Catholics everywhere about the church's mounting preoccupation with religious freedom.

The Kazakh situation poses a biting question to the Catholic conscience: Are we in this just for ourselves or to defend religious freedom for all?

Kazakhstan isn't exactly the front lines of today's religious freedom fights, since for the most part nobody's being shot. It is, however, a low-intensity combat zone, as the government under *de facto* President-for-Life Nursultan Nazarbayev is currently tightening the screws on any religious body perceived as a potential threat.

A new "Religion Law" in October 2011 required all religious communities to re-register with the state within a year or face being closed down. Forum 18, a Norwegian human rights organization that monitors the former Soviet sphere, reports that authorities are using the law to drive religious groups they don't like underground or out of business.

Targets include:

- Non-Sunni Muslim communities, such as Shi'ites and Ahmadis.
- Any "independent" mosque, whatever its form of Islam, meaning one not registered with the state.
- Mosques that serve ethnic minorities, such as Tatars, Chechens and Tajiks.
- The Hare Krishna.
- Various Christian bodies, including several Baptist churches and the Grace Presbyterian Church.

According to the reports, congregations belonging to these groups have been threatened with liquidation. The imam of a mosque that refused to register with a state-controlled "Muslim Board," for instance, said a regional official has warned him a bulldozer is on the way.

Strikingly, one religious body in the country enjoys a free pass: the Catholic church.

Catholics have been exempted from the registration requirement because of a 1998 treaty establishing diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Kazakhstan. It was finally ratified by the Kazakh legislature in September after lobbying by the Vatican. Pope John Paul II's former Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Angelo Sodano, traveled to the country just ahead of the parliamentary vote.

As part of the deal, Kazakh officials stipulated that international agreements override domestic legislation, so Catholic parishes and organizations don't have to jump through the same legal hoops as everyone else.

Some observers have detected a slightly sleazy quid-pro-quo. When Sodano arrived, he proclaimed that "Europe

and America, the whole world, knows there is religious freedom in Kazakhstan." In November, the five Catholic bishops in the country wrote Nazarbayev to praise his commitment to "religious tolerance," a letter touted by state-controlled media.

Understandably, those assertions haven't gone down well among some Shi'ites, Ahmadis, Baptists and others. Some can't help suspecting the Catholics cut a deal to protect their own hide, leaving others to fend for themselves, and that part of the exchange was a bit of favorable PR for the Nazarbayev regime.

In the interest of fairness, two points should be added to the picture.

First, there is a striking climate of tolerance at the grassroots in Kazakhstan, perhaps especially in terms of Muslim/Christian relations. Historically, most Christians didn't arrive as conquerors but in chains, deported there during the era of Joseph Stalin's persecutions. Many were taken in by Kazakh Muslim families, breeding a sense of solidarity.

When John Paul II visited Kazakhstan in 2001, I remember walking among the crowd at his Mass in Astana, the capital, and being struck by strong turnout among young Muslims. When I asked what they were doing there, many said that because the pope had reached out to them, they wanted to return the favor.

Thus to say there's religious tolerance in Kazakhstan isn't just politically convenient rhetoric. It speaks to something real in the culture, whatever government policy may be.

Second, it's easy to make judgments at a distance about what church leaders in a place like Kazakhstan ought to do. Among other things, outsiders don't have to worry about unannounced visits from the KNB, the Kazakh secret police, a not-so-subtle form of intimidation that's become common for some religious bodies.

Catholics have been in Kazakhstan since the second century, when Roman prisoners of war were exiled there by the Persians (another instance of Christians arriving in chains). For the most part, however, it's come out into the open only in the post-Soviet period and it remains a fledging enterprise. Understandably, church leaders are eager to protect it.

That said, there's still a critical question on the table. Should the church be content to defend its institutional interests, courting at least the impression of acquiescence while others are threatened? Or in the long run, will it be more effective to project an across-the-board concern for religious freedom, opening the door to potential alliances, and making the effort seem principled rather than parochial?

Perhaps the answers aren't obvious, but the question needs to be confronted head-on, and Kazakhstan may be as good a place as any to start.

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Anyone who's heard me on the lecture circuit knows that one of my standard rants is the need to get past the tribal warfare that sometimes plagues Catholic life, pitting liberals against conservatives, pro-lifers against peace-and-justice people, movements against diocesan structures, and on and on.

All these tribes bring something valuable to the table, so the key isn't to suppress them. It's to foster the tribalism of the Iroquois Confederacy rather than the Balkans -- a spirit of cooperation, not internal combat.

Whenever I roll out that argument, somebody asks: Where do you see it happening?

One compelling for-instance is the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation in Canada, founded by Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, who first came to prominence as the CEO of World Youth Day in Toronto in 2002. (Rosica

was born in Rochester, N.Y., but has long been based in Canada.)

Salt and Light celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2013. In an era when some religious media outlets have copied the business model of much secular journalism -- i.e., feeding the prejudices of a particular tribe -- Salt and Light's success suggests there's actually a market for a more non-ideological approach open to a variety of instincts and voices.

Launched in 2003, Salt and Light's cornerstone TV programming is now available in 2.6 million homes in Canada and is streamed 24/7 on the Internet. [Their website](#) [1] boasts about 2,500 videos available on demand, including 400 in Chinese. They've got a radio service, a blog, a glossy four-color semiannual magazine with a circulation around 90,000, and even an iPhone and Android app. They've also produced well-received documentaries on Catholic subjects that get wide play beyond their own platforms.

Rosica has a knack for attracting talented, energetic young Catholics to work at Salt and Light, people who are deeply faithful but without a chip on their shoulder -- the same approach he employed for World Youth Day. [Here's a recent feature](#) [2] on Rosica in a secular Canadian magazine, which captures some of the flavor of the place.

Among the messages Rosica has received to mark the anniversary is a Dec. 1 letter from Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, expressing hope that "as you continue to make inroads into the United States ... the church in the USA will welcome Salt and Light with open arms."

It will be interesting to see if American Catholic arms are indeed opened wide to Salt and Light in 2013, during its anniversary year. That might be good news not only for the network, but for a sometimes badly divided American church.

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Last week, [I wrote](#) [3] about a Dec. 3 Vatican press conference touting Benedict XVI's debut on Twitter. Among other things, I suggested that the Vatican's new communications guru, Greg Burke, brought a different tone -- less preachy, less stiff and obviously comfortable with journalistic argot.

To illustrate the point, I described an exchange between Burke and veteran Reuters correspondent Phil Pulella, who asked if the pope might use his Twitter account to push back against media coverage he doesn't like. Pulella gave the example of stories suggesting Benedict had "canceled Christmas" because of his new book on the infancy narratives, which cast doubt on some details -- whether there really were oxen and donkeys at Jesus' manger, and so on.

I quoted Burke saying he'd love it if Benedict tweeted something like, "Pulella got it wrong," while adding that it's not likely to happen.

I told the story to illustrate Burke's relaxed style. Upon reflection, however, I may have given the impression that the "canceled Christmas" headline was Pulella's fault. In fact, about a week after the book came out, Pulella wrote a piece debunking precisely those accounts. It's never easy for journalists to take on the work of their colleagues, even indirectly, so Pulella deserves some credit for boldness.

His write-up was cited both by the U.S. bishops' conference and by Vatican Radio to correct faulty impressions of what Benedict was trying to say.

Like Burke, Pullella is an old friend, and I don't want to head into the Christmas season having done him an injustice. So, for the record: Neither Pope Benedict XVI nor Phil Pullella is the Grinch who stole Christmas!

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"All Things Catholic" will be on hiatus for the next couple of weeks while I'm working on the manuscript of my forthcoming book from Image Books, *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution*.

If everything goes as planned, "All Things Catholic" will return on Friday, Jan. 4, with my annual run-down of the most under-covered Vatican stories of the year. In the meantime, here's wishing everyone a blessed Christmas and happy New Year. *Buon Natale e Buon Capodanno a tutti!*

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[1] <http://saltandlighttv.org/>

[2] <http://thewalrus.ca/preacher-in-practice/?ref=2012.07-profile-preacher-in-practice>

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[4] <mailto:jallen@ncronline.org>