

Vatican family czar says pro-life, peace-and-justice work a package deal

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 27, 2013 NCR Today
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When a brief mini-tempest broke out a few days ago over whether Pope Francis had, or had not, once signaled openness to civil registration of same-sex unions in Argentina, nobody in the Vatican was probably in a better position to appreciate where it might lead than Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Council for the Family.

(Various media outlets reported that as Argentina was gearing up for a national debate over same-sex marriage in 2010, then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio had floated the idea of civil unions as an alternative. That claim has been denied by Miguel Woites, director of a Catholic news agency in Argentina.)

In his own way, Paglia had been down this road before.

Last February, just a week before Benedict XVI's resignation announcement, Paglia said during a Vatican news conference that while the church is opposed to anything that treats other unions as equivalent to marriage between a man and a woman, it could accept "private law solutions" for protecting people's rights.

In some quarters the line was styled as undercutting bishops in both France and the United States fighting off proposals for gay marriage, which he insisted he had no intention of doing. It was an experience Paglia would later look back on as an example of how seemingly innocent comments can be "derailed" in the context of fierce political tensions.

Paglia, 67, took over as the Vatican's family czar in June 2012. He comes out of the Community of Sant'Egidio, which is conventionally seen as center-left in the terms of Italian politics, and he's also the official responsible for the sainthood cause of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, a hero to the church's peace-and-justice wing. At first blush, that might seem a counterintuitive profile for the head of a Vatican department long been seen as the Vatican's "tip of the spear" for fighting the Western culture wars.

Paglia, however, sees his various commitments as part of the same deep passion for humanity.

"All these efforts ? to defend the poor, to defend those on death row, to defend human life at its earliest stages ? are applications of the same principle, which is the defense of humanity," he said.

One of his hopes is to reintroduce Catholic teaching on the family in a positive key, so that the emphasis falls more on what the church supports than what it opposes.

On other matters, Paglia said:

- Francis is a pope "the whole world needs," one who lives the Gospel "without any gloss."
- Reform of the Roman Curia is important, but "we don't need Swiss watches." Efficiency is less important

than shaping a system that works for others.

- There's a "solid foundation" for believing that Pope Francis will attend the next World Meeting of Families, set for Philadelphia in 2015.
- A culture of exaggerated individualism is creating an "anthropological abyss", according to Paglia: "Today the 'I' is destroying the 'We.'"
- Defense of the family shouldn't break down along liberal v. conservative lines, because "the left needs the family too."
- Momentum towards the beatification of Romero may be gathering steam, Paglia believes, especially in the light of beatification of a "martyr of the mafia" in May.

Paglia sat down for an interview with NCR on Feb. 9, and again on March 21 to bring things up to date with the election of Pope Francis. The interviews were in Italian; the following is an English translation of the combined text.

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What's your first impression of Pope Francis?

My first impression is that of a man of God, a pope that not just the church but the whole world needed. Throughout history, the church has always had to reposition itself based on the times and the situations it faced. I believe that today, after the first decade of this new century and new millennium, Pope Francis can lead the church back to its role as the spiritual guide of the world, of all humanity.

Everywhere today, there's an extreme need for paternity, for a point of reference. The French psychoanalyst [Jacques] Lacan has spoken of our epoch as a time of the 'evaporation of the father.' More than ever today, there's a deep need for a paternal presence, and Pope Francis is that father figure.

Did you know Cardinal Bergoglio personally?

I met him a few times over the years, but I knew his activity as the archbishop of Buenos Aires very well.

For most in the Vatican press corps, the choice of Bergoglio was a surprise. Was it a surprise for you too?

I was hoping it would be him, and I thought it was possible. He wasn't on any anyone's list, with a few exceptions, but he was on my interior list!

Why were you hoping for him?

I thought there was a need, in the context of a process of globalization in which the market seems to trump everything else, of a Pope who can help the church live the Gospel with greater clarity and without any gloss, like Francis of Assisi.

You run the Vatican's Council for the Family. What message regarding the family do you expect from Pope Francis?

I believe this Pope will propose a comprehensive message about the family. We've already heard him talk, when he was Cardinal of Buenos Aires, about the family in his speeches for this dicastery, and he's touched on all aspects of the subject: from the themes on morality and bioethics, to the matters about education, work, the importance of respect for the elderly, and a spirit of welcome for the newborn. He realizes that the family is the most robust resource for our society. He'll put it at the center not only of the life of the Church, but also political, economic and cultural life.

Before and after the conclave, people have been talking about a reform of the Roman Curia. What kind of reform do you think we can expect from Pope Francis?

I'm convinced that a reform of the structures of governance here is indispensable. There's no doubt about it. At the same time, we don't need Swiss watches! Structures are not the real movers of history. The lack of a curia that runs like a Swiss watch isn't our biggest problem. The real challenge is to grasp who we're working for? Is it for ourselves, or for others? This Pope certainly will lead a reform of the curia, but what's more important is to shape a curia that works for others, that leads the church to be ferment for the whole world, a church that assumes its responsibility for creation and respect for life, a church that helps all peoples rediscover the value of fraternity.

We need to get past a self-referential church, or a church that's on the defensive. We need a church that places itself at the service of others, and not in a feeble or weak fashion. The Pope has spoken of power, but a power that expresses itself in service. It's the power of stopping the car in front of a disabled sick man rather than in front of the powerful VIPs. That's a kind of power in itself, having the courage to say to the driver, 'We're stopping here: There's a weak person to help and to comfort.' It's what the Good Samaritan did in the Gospel parable. In sum, it's the power of staying in the street.

The next World Meeting of Families is set for the United States, in Philadelphia, in 2015. Do you expect that Pope Francis will go?

I know that the Archbishop of Philadelphia has invited him, and I think it's more than plausible that he will accept. I think we can hope for it, with a solid foundation for doing so. Certainly, it will be a visit that leaves its mark.

People often see the church's message on the family largely in negative terms? opposition to divorce, artificial reproduction, gay marriage, and so on. Can it be reintroduced in a positive key?

There's no doubt that up to now, the church has stayed too much in the sacristy. We have to get out into the squares and into the streets. In those places, you can see that the family? mother, father, and children? is right there, and it's the most important resource for our society. In this time of financial crisis, if it weren't for our families we would already have been submersed by a sort of unimaginable tsunami. If the church, which, as Paul VI said, is an expert in humanity, is animated by a compassionate gospel spirit, it will see this reality and be able to talk credibly about it in a positive way. We'll be able to see that the sick would be abandoned without their families, the elderly would be lost, small children wouldn't know how to grow up, the young wouldn't know where to go. In a time when it's hard to find work, and in which young people often have to stay at home longer, what would happen to them without their families?

I believe that this is one of the first responsibilities I have as president of this pontifical council? to make these realities clearer, and to help us talk about them in a convincing way. The family is the foundation of every human society, whether they're Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, or whatever. There's a need for a new start, a new cultural approach. The first point ought to be that the family doesn't belong to the Catholic Church. This isn't a confessional subject, but one that's imminently human and social. If I can put it this way, Jesus, knowing

how central the family in human life, elevated matrimony to a sacrament in order to introduce the couple in a new dimension of grace.

I'm a Roman, so let me quote Cicero, who wasn't a Catholic and not even a Christian. He defined the family this way: *Familia est principium urbis et quasi seminarium rei publicae*, meaning, "The family is the fundament of the city and like a school of citizenship." Without strong families, we would have disfigured cities and unsustainable societies. Centuries ago, the great jurist Justinian said that marriage is the union between a man and a woman, and he didn't say it as a believer but as a citizen of the world. We have to rediscover this basic reality and help people see that the importance of the family is not something the church is imposing, but it's a fact of life.

Recent sociological studies, for example, show that the family composed of a mother, a father, and two or three children, has significant advantages with respect to all the other modes of living together. People in traditional families live longer, they produce more, they have fewer psychological disturbances, and they create a much stronger social fabric. A study in the United States, for instance, recently found that 85 percent of inmates in correctional facilities for youth come from families without a father. Here's another confirmation. The tendency to limit families to one child, whether it's imposed by the state or the result of personal choice, leads to the aging of societies. I also find myself asking, after twenty years, what will these millions of one-child citizens understand about the terms 'brother' or 'sister'? Will they be cancelled from our vocabulary? Unfortunately, we'll probably come to understand the gravity of some of these choices only when it's too late.

You cite the aging of societies and other challenges created by demographic shifts. On many points, it's impossible to offer empirical confirmation of Church teaching ? for instance, there's no way to scientifically establish that God is three persons. When it comes to the importance of the family and of having children, are you convinced there actually is hard evidence to support the Church's concerns?

Absolutely. I think you have to credit John Paul II and Ratzinger, Pope Benedict, because they understood that.

Also Paul VI, yes?

Actually, we should remember that it was Paul VI in 1973 who established the first commission for the family. It was the basis for this pontifical council.

Of course, there's also a clear spiritual and theological basis for our concern for the family beyond the empirical data. In Genesis, God created man and woman. It's not just the single individual who is the image of God, but also the couple, the family.

If it's so clear, why is the traditional family a tough sell?

That's a good question. We have to ask ourselves why, if the desire for a family is actually written into the human heart, fewer people are getting married and so many are getting separated and divorced. In my view, the problem is that what I would call the 'culture of the individual' is ever more prevalent. It's the exaltation of the 'I' as the custodian of every right, holding the right to have all possible rights. By the way, English is the only language in which 'I' is capitalized!

This cult of the 'I' finds its prime obstacle in the family. Today, the 'I' is destroying the 'we.'

Sociologists talk more and more about the 'individualization' of society, and you see its consequences everywhere. For instance, you see it in a political trend of states or regions to close in on themselves. In Italy, someone from North asks, 'Why should I give money to the South?' People in Europe ask, 'Why should I be concerned about Africa?' In reality, this growing individualization of society, and its corresponding tendencies

toward withdrawal and isolation signifies an epochal confrontation against the very nature of the person, who is essential relational.. We have to return to the first book of Genesis, and on this point Pope Benedict has been prophetically forward-looking. The first chapter of Genesis says, 'It's not good for man to be alone.' Today's culture says, 'It is good to be alone,' but that's not true.

You're saying that in this epochal confrontation, the family is the most important 'weapon' to combat hyper-individualism?

Exactly. It's the role of this dicastery to promote an evangelical alternative, so to speak, within the ecclesial family, though doing so in positive terms ? to help the Church make a positive proposal about the family. For example, we have to help engaged couples to understand what marriage is all about. We have to support young families, because they can't do it all by themselves. They need a community, a network of friendship. We have to make sure that Sunday allows for a meeting of families within the larger family of faith. This is an enormous task.

We also have to undertake a long journey in the cultural arena to persuade people anew that not only is the family possible, it's beautiful. It's simply not true that young people today don't want it. Quite often, they're not helped to realize the dream of having a family by the culture, by the economy, even by the ecclesial community sometimes.

What's the battle plan look like?

We need a great commitment to return the family to the heart of our political concerns. Today, rights seem to belong only to individuals. Last February I spoke at the United Nations, to emphasize the "Charter of Rights of the Family," which was issued by the Holy See 30 years ago and, unfortunately, largely ignored. There's an urgent need to recover the idea that the family, too, is a holder of rights.

There's also the critically important task reintroducing the family within the heart of the economy. The family, in itself, is a genuine business enterprise. An economy that's attentive to the family has many advantages. For instance, instead of making women to commute to work, why not draw on modern means of technology to allow women, where possible, to work from home if that's their choice? Young people would have more supervision and less likely to end up drawing on social services, and so on. Nobody thinks about these things, but they're real. Without taking the family into consideration, we end up with a badly distorted kind of capitalism.

What sort of opposition do you expect?

Even in highly secular nations such as Germany and France, and in Italy, surveys consistently find that 70 to 80 percent of young people say their ideal is to be married to the same person, a wife or a husband, for their entire life. So what happens? Unfortunately, contemporary society crushes this desire. Many claim that it's impossible. They are made to believe that the economy doesn't help the family. They are bombarded with advertising and with an exasperated sort of hyper-sexuality. They disempower these young people by insisting that what they want isn't politically correct. Here's how it works: In Italy, if you shout 'Juventus forever!', everybody cheers. But you can't say, 'My wife forever!' many declare "It's just not possible".

Given all this, I think it's important to reaffirm that the family is a crucial dimension of society, and not just because the church says so. At the U.N., I'm not going to propose something Catholic. I'm a Catholic and I'm sustained by my faith, but it doesn't require any religious conviction to see the family as the most precious thing in the United States, in Europe, in Asia, in any human culture.

In the West, we live in a hyper-ideological culture in which defense of the family is typically seen as a right-wing concern. Does that bother you?

Yes, it bothers me, because the left needs the family too.

The primary danger of the moment has nothing to do with the politics of left vs. right. It's that we're emptying the meaning of the words 'marriage' and 'family,' and thus their substance, in order to privilege individual satisfaction and impulses. Marriage is between a man and a woman for their good and, if is possible, for raising of children. Indeed, the latter is a basic call of marriage, to link the generations. It's not just the space in which two people love each other. This is the basic error ? the family is the place where the generations meet one another, not just a vehicle for fulfilling an individual's desires.

People say that the family has changed over the centuries, and of course that's right. I, too, have changed between when I was three months old to today when I'm 67. Nobody looked at me when I was three months old and said, 'Your Excellency!' Yet I'm the same person. Three centuries ago, houses in the United States looked a lot different the skyscrapers of New York or Los Angeles or Philadelphia, but they still had four walls and a ceiling. Yes, there have been changes in the family, and many of them for the good. It's a positive thing, for example, that today marriage is generally the result of a free choice between the spouses rather than being arranged by the parents.

However, it's one thing for the family to evolve and another thing to redefine it altogether. Those theoreticians who want to expand marriage to include two homosexuals might well be asked, why just two people? Why not five, or thirty? Actually, if legal recognition of various kinds of unions is premised on sex, it forces the state in a manner that's virtually dictatorial to enter into questions that ought to be private, not public. If two elderly people want to live together, they need not have new rights to be defended than the already existing individual ones. But marriage is something else. It's an object both public and private law because it has deep historical roots, because it precedes the law itself.

Speaking of private law, you recently created a small media frenzy by suggesting that nations could find "private law solutions" to protect the rights of unmarried couples, potentially including gays and lesbians. In some quarters, that was seen as softening the Vatican's line on gay marriage at a time when bishops in various countries are trying to resist a push for it. Did you learn anything from that episode?

Yes, that I have to be more careful in how I talk about these things, and more aware that words can be derailed. You may think they're going to take you to the station, but in reality they can carry you to the edge of a cliff! But to make clear to you what I actually meant at the time, I proposed what the church has maintained: it is a matter of [protecting] individual rights. Facing the explosion in various forms of living together today, I simply called on states to find solutions which help people and avoid abuses.

Among those who pay attention to church affairs, the Pontifical Council for the Family is usually seen as the Vatican's 'tip of the spear' for fighting the culture wars. Is that the reputation you want for it?

I hope our vision is bigger. The Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas wrote a small book several decades ago called *The Edge of the Abyss*, in which he talked about ecology. Well before it was fashionable, he criticized the absence of sound choices on the subject. He said that states, governments and individuals were continuing to do what they'd always done, without realizing that they stood on the edge of an abyss. The same thing is true of the nuclear age. For the first time in human history, we have the capacity to utterly destroy the planet. Today, I would say we also face an anthropological abyss, in which some so-called philosophers think that human beings are entirely constructible by themselves, in a manner that's total and absolute. Nature is irrelevant, all that matters is culture. When they say 'culture,' of course, they mean the culture of the 'I'.

The church feels this drama, and the risks it poses. On this front, I suppose, I'm a conservative, but what I'm trying to conserve is the future. I don't want us all to head blindly to the brink of disaster following the Pied Piper.

It's true that people don't always understand why the church is fighting these battles, and in that regard I think we need an examination of conscience. Unless our 'no' is perceived to be full of love, it will sound false. Think about what happens in the family. If a father says 'no' to a son who's doing something dangerous, and says it only in that moment without ever having shown concern before, then the child will perceive the father as an oppressor. But if the father loves his son, if he's taken care of him when he's sick, if he's celebrated with him when he does well, if the son knows that his father is trying to guide him towards his goals and helps him when he's having trouble, then that 'no' becomes an expression of love, not a form of prohibition. That's what the church has to rediscover, at all levels, from the diocese to the parishes.

Let me put it this way: Is a church that says a strong 'no' to pedophilia a totalitarian church, or one that loves its children?

You come from Sant'Egidio, which is known for its work on peace and justice issues, while this council is seen as a beachhead for the pro-life movement. Some might regard your new job as a major transition, but do you see it that way?

Not at all. The concern that ought to motivate any Christian, in this case a bishop and a president of a pontifical council, is not protecting one's own shop but defending humanity from the risks it runs. That defense isn't just mounted from the altar, by wagging a finger. It's about standing with people and making them feel my warmth, my love, not in the first place my approval or disapproval for what they're doing.

I defend life across the board. I'm against the death penalty, and I'm also against exploitation of the human embryo. Precisely because I don't just want to say 'no,' in my former diocese of Terni the church helped finance the launch of the first center of research for adult stem cells. We're now getting ready to close the first phase of experiments on the use of these cells to help people who suffer from ALS [Lou Gehrig's disease]. We're not against science ? we financed this project. I'm convinced that if you have to destroy an embryo to obtain a cell, that's the destruction of human life. But that doesn't mean that I resign myself to the inevitability of disease, and thanks be to God, we've found very encouraging results.

The point is that all these efforts ? to defend the poor, to defend those on death row, to defend human life at its earliest stages ? are applications of the same principle, which is the defense of humanity. I see this responsibility [at the Council for the Family] as a continuation of what I've always been doing, not as leaving something behind.

What are your upcoming projects for the Pontifical Council for the Family?

Right now I've got two objectives. Pastorally, one regards helping the church throughout the world to better

prepare young people who are getting ready for marriage. We need to find a new language for them. We also need to connect the family in a much tighter fashion to the parish community. If families are left by themselves, they rupture. It's not good for man to be alone, sure, but it's also not good for the family to be alone. Sunday therefore becomes crucial. It's the day of thanksgiving, of celebration, of rest, and we can't ever give that up, but it also needs to be the day of the family. The parish can't just be a structure fielding an army of workers who perform services with their heads down in hospitals and so on, as important as those are, but it also needs to be where families come together. I also want to promote the idea of every family having and reading its own Bible, and I have to say that in this regard the United States is in a higher gear.

On the cultural front, we've also got some things going on. In April, for instance, we're organizing our first conference on the family as the primary business firm, bringing together economists. We'll open with a prayer, but we're not going to be talking about prayer in the family. We're going to be talking about work. We also want to involve intellectuals in a discussion about the rights of the family. It's important to study it from a juridical point of view, and perhaps make proposals to governments if they're needed. We also want to take up the problem of inter-generational relations, which has to be faced all around. We're organizing a conference on that subject too.

Finally, let me ask a question on a different subject. In addition to your position at the Council for the Family, will you also continue to serve as the postulator for the sainthood cause of Oscar Romero?

No doubt, and with great enthusiasm.

Where do things stand?

I believe that the beatification of Padre Puglisi as a 'martyr of the mafia' opens some interesting lines of reflection. [Fr. Giuseppe "Pino" Puglisi was an anti-mafia priest in Sicily murdered in 1993 and set to be beatified May 25.]

John Paul II once said, 'Romero is of the Church.' Romero is an example of a pastor who gave his life for others. Beyond any canonical problems in terms of whether he died directly *in odium fidei* ["hatred of the faith"], Romero continues to be a point of reference for millions and millions of people, believers and non-believers alike. I was moved, and it made a deep impression on me, when a President of the United States, in this case Obama, stood before the tomb of Oscar Romero, made the sign of the cross and bowed. He did well, because that symbolism was more powerful than any speech.

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