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Vatican should set example on fighting abuse, O'Malley says

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

World Youth Day 2013

Rio de Janeiro — Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley has spent the last two decades dealing with the church's sexual abuse scandals, so when he speaks on the subject, people listen — presumably, up to and including Pope Francis himself.

In April, Francis named O'Malley as one of eight cardinals from around the world to help him govern the universal church and to reform the Vatican, in part, perhaps, because of his profile as a reformer on the abuse crisis.

In an interview today, O'Malley acknowledged that so far Francis hasn't yet really engaged the issue, and suggested two steps he believes the pope could take that would make a difference:

- Prodding bishops' conferences from around the world that haven't yet finished their anti-abuse guidelines, offering whatever resources they need to get the job done.
- Implementing in the Vatican the same anti-abuse protocols that dioceses and other Catholic venues have adopted, including background checks and screening of all personnel, training in abuse prevention and detection, as well as training in how to handle accusations when they arise and how to conduct outreach to victims. Doing so, he said, would be a "powerful example."

O'Malley made the comments in a July 26 interview in Rio de Janeiro, where he's taking part in the July 22-28 World Youth Day.

On other matters:

- O'Malley said members of the council of cardinals have been individually collecting ideas for Vatican reform from other bishops ? he's personally interviewing each of the American and Canadian cardinals, he said, and has written to all the archbishops of North America soliciting advice.
- O'Malley said he's been in direct contact with Francis on several matters related to the council's work. His exchanges have not been filtered through the Vatican's Secretariat of State or any other office, he said, and he's received personal hand-written replies from Francis.
- O'Malley also reflected on his improbable emergence as a much-touted papal candidate last March, confirming that it wasn't just pundits creating a buzz around him. ?Lots of cardinals? put out his name too, he said, and he was told that if the conclave had gone on another day or so, ?I would have been in great danger.? O'Malley added that he's glad it wrapped up when it did, because ?it's so obvious the Holy Spirit gave us the right man.?

The interview took place in the afternoon, after O'Malley spent the morning speaking and taking questions from a crowd of some 2,500 to 3,000 English-speaking youth from around the world, gathered at the ?Vivo Rio? center.

* * *

You spoke to the youth this morning about how if you want a tough missionary assignment, you don't have to go to the four corners of the earth anymore. It's in the U.S., it's in Europe, and so on. Is Francis the right missionary for the culture of the West today?

Oh, I think so. I think his style has captured the imagination and the hearts of a lot of people who were kind of turned off by the church. Suddenly they're giving us a second look because of him. It's not that he's going to change the doctrines of the church, but they like his style and they like the fact that he's holding up the social gospel of the church, so people can see that this is part of what building a civilization of love is about.

The media likes to focus on controversial topics and I think people are tired of them, and unfortunately often ill-prepared to respond. Sometimes they come to think those things are the whole story. This man has been able to get people to look at the church in a new light.

At a practical level, is it easier to be a bishop when you have a popular pope?

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I think so, because I think people feel good about being a Catholic. There's more interest. To be fair to the popes we've had, I think they've all been pretty popular. They've all had their constituencies that were particularly enamored of them, but all these men have been extraordinarily gifted people who were able to teach well and touch people's lives by their personal holiness, their wisdom, and their talent. But this man is full of surprises! That's good, because it breaks through the ?been there, done that? attitude.

You helped elect this pope. Have you gotten pretty much what you expected, or has he surprised you too?

In some things I'm surprised, and in others not. I was kind of surprised with the name Francis, but I very

quickly came to understand that it was a very important message. Everything else has kind of flowed from the themes of Francis' life, and we're seeing them lived out in his papacy.

What are some of the other surprises?

Well, I didn't expect him to live in the Santa Marta and these other things. I knew that the church's social gospel would be front and center with this man, realizing the experience of the church in Latin America. It's a church that's dealt with life and death issues for so long. In other parts of the world, we sometimes get caught up in some very superficial things, but in Latin America it's awfully basic. When you've seen dictatorships imprisoning people and killing them, when you've seen people starving to death, it focuses you on the essentials.

Creation of the council of eight cardinals probably wasn't a surprise, because that had been discussed at the General Congregation meetings leading up the conclave, correct?

I can't say much about what was talked about in the General Congregations, but there has been a desire for greater collegiality among all the bishops, I think, including the cardinals. This is a response to that. I suspect that as Cardinal Bergoglio, he also saw the need for this kind of thing. It's in keeping with his emphasis on the church getting out of the sacristy.

I heard that those of you from the group who are here in Rio were going to try to get together. Has that happened?

Not yet, though we're going to try. The original game plan was to get together on Monday, but I haven't spoken to anybody yet because I've been busy with the catechetical sessions. We are going to meet in Rome in September prior to the meeting with the Holy Father, I presume at the Casa Santa Marta.

How have you organized your work so far?

We've been talking on the phone and exchanging e-mails. I've written to the Holy Father a number of times, and it's kind of a new experience getting a response directly from him! Especially when we're talking about hand-written letters.

Have all eight of you spoken together at the same time?

No.

When you do, what language do you think you'll use?

I suppose Italian or Spanish. Probably Italian, because maybe not everybody speaks Spanish. I'm sure it will be one of those two.

Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras, the coordinator of the group, gave an interview recently in which he said he'd met with the pope here in Rio and presented him with the idea of putting together an *instrumentum laboris*, or working paper, with ideas for Vatican reform. Can you flesh out what the idea is?

I'm not sure, because we haven't discussed it. A number of us have been collecting thoughts and ideas from different people. Cardinal [Francisco] Errázuriz polled the members of CELAM when they met a couple months ago in Panama. [Note: CELAM is the Episcopal Conference of Latin America.] I've been interviewing each of the American cardinals individually, as well as Cardinal [Tom] Collins [of Toronto], and I've written to all of the archbishops in the United States and Canada to ask for their thoughts, and

I'm trying to compile all of that. I know that Oscar [Rodriguez] and others are doing similar things.

Perhaps the idea of the *instrumentum laboris* is to pull all that together?

I think that's probably it, yes.

Is the premise that you don't want it to be just the eight of you doing this alone, you want it to bring in all the bishops?

That's what we're talking about. No one has given us any job description, but I told the Holy Father we were doing this. I know the cardinals and archbishops I've contacted have all been very happy about it, and many of them had some great ideas they wanted to share.

When you have questions or you want to report on something, you're dealing directly with the pope? It's not being funneled through the Secretariat of State or any of the other offices?

I don't know what other people are doing, but my contact has been directly with him.

I know you can't talk about specifics, but in general what should we expect from the meeting in October? Is this just to sit down and compare notes, or do you expect it to produce some concrete proposals for the pope?

I'm not sure how far we can get. I think there are a few concrete ideas that will be brought forth. I've already written to the Holy Father about some of them, because some of them are time-sensitive ? offers of help we've received, for instance. We haven't really had a meeting yet as a group, it's all been individual communications, so it's too early for me to forecast what might happen.

Since your council was created, two other groups have also been formed ? one to study the Vatican bank, and one for the economic and administrative structures of the Vatican. Do you have a clear division of labor for these three different groups?

No, but I was delighted, because I was afraid we were going to have to do it all ... I was thinking about the bank, particularly. I'm thrilled that that piece of it is going to be worked on by somebody else.

The Vatican bank has brought in the Promontory Group [a U.S.-based financial consulting firm] to advise them, and some members of the council for economic and administrative structures have backgrounds with companies such as Ernst and Young. Beyond the bishops, has the council of cardinals thought about widening the net in terms of who you ask for advice?

We've had some interesting offers, people who are willing to help us out pro bono, and the Holy Father is very open to us doing that. That's something we'll discuss at our next meeting too. We're certainly open to people and institutions with expertise on things like systems and management.

Tonight at the Via Crucis, the pope talked about people who have lost faith in the church, or even in God, because of the ?counter-witness of Christians and ministers of the Gospel.? Is it fair to hear an echo of the sexual abuse scandals in that?

I'm sure that's an aspect of it.

You've been dealing with this issue for a long time, and objectively speaking, Francis really hasn't done a whole lot on that front yet. What do you think would be helpful for him to do?

I think he probably needs to bring together the presidents of the bishops' conferences. The Vatican has asked the conferences to submit their guidelines, and I understand some of them still haven't done it. Some of them have tried to do it but are not well-equipped. We need to deal with that, in part by helping those conferences to do a good job and to press on. There need to be resources in place to help those conferences.

Also, I think it's important that the Vatican set an example. It would be a powerful example if the Vatican were to say we do trainings here, we do screenings here, we're committed to transparency. I know that will not be easy.

Some time ago I addressed the Capuchin bishops [from around the world], and I said that especially because most of us [Capuchins] are in the missions, it's important to think about this. People are so vulnerable to the powerful figure of a priest, so in the cultures we're serving you really have to have guidelines in place. Afterwards, the father general [of the Capuchins] said I think we should deal with this at our chapter meeting. I said I'll write you about it, so I wrote him with some suggestions. He brought it up at the chapter, and there was resistance ? this is an American problem, we don't want a *brutta figura*, all that kind of stuff. But, he pushed it through.

Your point being that if that's the reaction among the Capuchins, one can only imagine what trying to adopt an American-style protocol for the Vatican would be like?

Sure, because it's still very much an Italian culture, but I think it would be a very powerful thing. If we're asking the bishops' conferences to do this, then certainly the Vatican ought to do it too.

You're talking about implementing in the Vatican the same protocols we have in other ministerial environments ? background checks, screening, training in abuse prevention and detection, and so on?

Also training in the protocols for how to handle an accusation when it comes in, and how to handle the outreach to the victims.

It's been four and a half months since you were a hot pick to become pope yourself. Looking back on it, what sense do you make of it all?

First of all, I am still kind of shocked that an American cardinal could be *papabile*. I never thought I'd live to see that, much less that I'd be the one to be involved in it. I know there were a lot of cardinals who were sort of pushing my name out there. Some people said that if the conclave had lasted another day or so, I would have been in great danger. I'm just very relieved that it wrapped up when it did, because I think it's so obvious the Holy Spirit gave us the right man, and I'm very happy.

To use the American slang, do you feel like you dodged a bullet?

In some ways, sure. It's still so unbelievable.

I remember saying at the time that even if you didn't get elected, all the buzz had already changed your life. It turned you from a national into an international celebrity, which would likely mean more speaking invitations, more media interest, more offers to sit on boards, and so on. Has that happened?

It has, although even more curious is the effect it's had in Boston. People feel good about their church ?

they're so competitive, it's like the Red Sox versus the Yankees. They loved that part of it. Everywhere I go, people come up and say, "Oh, we were voting for you, we were praying for you. You were our pick." My reaction is always "God help us," but on the other hand it's nice that people have that positive feeling about the church and about their bishop.

From the outside, some might wonder where that comes from. After all, objectively speaking, you didn't win.

As I say, these are people who root for the Red Sox every year!

Finally, you've been to several World Youth Days. Do you detect something new this time because of Francis?

I think with the Latin Americans, there's a great thrill with his presence here. I'm very hopeful that's going to have an energizing effect on the entire continent, in the way that John Paul II energized Eastern Europe.

Can it translate into rolling back the losses to the evangelicals and the Pentecostals?

I hope so. I think it will help. The problem, especially in a place like Brazil, is that we now have a lot of second-generation Pentecostals. With people who are still Catholic but kind of on the fringe, maybe going to the Pentecostal church once in a while, I think this can help bring them back. Once they have no lived experience of being Catholic, it's more difficult.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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