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Telling Africa's story; the Coptic Kristallnacht; latest Dall'Oglio rumors

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Any Western journalist who's spent time in Africa knows the usual reaction when a local bumps into one of us: "Why don't you report any good news about Africa? Can't you find something to talk about beyond Africans starving or killing each other?"

There's also a Catholic version of the complaint: "Can't you do any story about the church in Africa other than condoms and AIDS?"

This came home for me in 2009, when Benedict XVI visited Cameroon. The trip was rich in content, including a dramatic challenge to corruption under the country's strongman president Paul Biya and repeated expressions of the dynamism of a young and growing church. Yet the lone storyline in the Western press was the pope's comment aboard the papal plane that condoms make AIDS worse.

As I wrote at the time, I've never covered a papal trip in which the experience on the ground and the story being told in the international media were as starkly in contrast, and it left a lot of African Catholics fuming.

At one stage during the trip, I was invited to speak to 30 or 40 young Catholics in Cameroon. They peppered me with questions about why journalists seemed almost deliberately to be distorting the story. Where I grew up, we would have said these folks were "spittin' mad."

Frankly, I can't really say I blamed them.

It's not that the Western press never does positive stories about Africa. In secular terms, we've covered the

largely peaceful transition from apartheid in South Africa, the birth of a new nation in South Sudan, and the reputation for good governance and economic development enjoyed by Botswana. In the church arena, I've written that Africa in many ways is the Catholic future so often my hand threatens to cramp.

Nonetheless, too often we sweep into Africa, do some story that happens to coincide with our own interests and agenda, and leave everything else enveloped in neglect. As strategies go for understanding the continent -- well, I probably don't need to finish that sentence.

This preamble is by way of introducing a new initiative that deserves to draw interest around the Catholic world: the Catholic News Agency for Africa, or CANAA, a new media initiative designed to allow African Catholics to tell their own stories. It's been established under the auspices of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM).

The idea is to do for Africa what outlets such as the Union of Catholic Asia News (UCAN) and AsiaNews already do for Asia and the Middle East, which is to report the news of the region from an in-the-trenches perspective and with a particular eye on its Christian communities.

Plans call for the agency to have a trial run from August 2013 to August 2014, with its initial base of operations in Nairobi, Kenya -- a strategic choice, given that Nairobi tends to be where most Western media outlets with a footprint in Africa set up shop.

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According to organizers, CANAA won't just peddle sweetness and light. The people behind the project are media professionals who understand that sometimes they'll have to stir the waters, but their aim is two-fold: first, getting the facts right, in contrast to the sloppiness and stereotypes that often dominate journalism about Africa; and second, injecting some balance, so misery and conflict aren't the only narratives.

The first coordinator of CANAA is Fr. Don Bosco Ochieng Onyalla, a priest of South Sudan who was previously the director of Radio Good News Radio in that country's diocese of Rumbek. Given high illiteracy rates and low television access, radio is about the only form of media in South Sudan that reaches ordinary people in their local language, and many observers credit Catholic radio with being the voice of civil society.

The first chair of CANAA's board of directors is Archbishop Charles G. Palmer-Buckle of Accra, Ghana, by consensus one of the sharpest and most impressive prelates on the continent.

The agency had a sort of trial run at World Youth Day in Brazil, with a veteran Nigerian media worker, Fr. Patrick Tor Alumuku, on the ground in Rio de Janeiro collecting African stories that CANAA edited and compiled. One such piece quoted African pilgrims calling for the next WYD after Krakow in 2016 to be held in Africa, since every other continent's now had at least one. The leading candidate seemed to be South Africa.

There's not yet an Internet presence for CANAA, though Ochieng is working on developing a website and blog.

Organizers say over time, they want CANAA to be self-sufficient. Right now, however, they need a minimal set of resources to get the ball rolling. Readers interested in learning more or who might be in a

position to offer support can contact the communications secretariat of SECAM at this email address: secaminfo2@gmail.com.

Here's hoping the project gets off the ground. Given the church's demographic realities in the early 21st century, the more we know about Africa, the more we'll know about the Catholic future writ large.

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Speaking of AsiaNews, it's a good resource for following the stunning assaults on Christian targets currently underway in Egypt. Last weekend, the agency released a list of churches, convents, monasteries and other Christian institutions that, at that point, had suffered damage at the hands of radicals linked in one way or another to the Muslim Brotherhood. Since the violence is continuing unabated, these numbers are already out of date.

One week ago, however, the totals verified by observers on the ground, according to the AsiaNews report, stood at:

- 14 Catholic churches and convents
- 35 Orthodox and evangelical churches
- 9 other Christian institutions
- 58 Christian homes
- 85 Christian-owned shops
- 16 Christian-owned pharmacies
- 3 Christian-owned hotels in Upper Egypt
- 75 buses and cars with Christian occupants

That works out to 247 incidents, which as of Aug. 17 had left seven people dead, 17 kidnapped, and hundreds injured.

Here's an example of the atrocities. On Aug. 14, hundreds of Muslim extremists stormed a school run by Franciscan nuns in Bani Suef (Upper Egypt), where they reportedly raped two teachers. Three nuns were paraded before the crowd as prisoners of war. In an interview afterward, the nun who runs the school said she and two other sisters were saved by another teacher, a Muslim laywoman, who persuaded the assailants to let them go. The nun also said the local police never showed up despite numerous calls for help.

Given the scale of things, it's not hard to understand why some Egyptian Christians are comparing their experience to *Kristallnacht*. Sam Tadros, a Coptic Christian and a historian at the Hudson Institute, says there's been nothing like the present wave of anti-Christian violence in Egypt since 1321, when a spate of church-burnings prompted an exodus that saw the country's Christian population drop from roughly half to its present 10 percent.

My new book, *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution*, doesn't even hit bookstores until Oct. 1, and already I feel like the section on Egypt needs an update.

In the abstract, it's hard to know what Christians in other parts of the world can do that might make a difference. If nothing else, however, we can at least factor the experience of those suffering persecution into our thinking and insist that our politicians do the same.

On Monday, the leader of the Coptic Catholic community in Egypt, Patriarch Ibrahim Isaac Sidrak of

Alexandria, released a statement on the violence. The full text follows:

With pain, but also with hope, the Catholic Church in Egypt is following what our country is experiencing: terrorist attacks, killings and the burning of churches, schools and state institutions. Therefore, out of love for our country and in solidarity with all lovers of Egypt, Christians and Muslims, we are trying to do our best to communicate with friendly organizations around the world to clarify for them the reality of events taking place in our country.

We would like to express the following:

Our free, strong and conscious support for all state institutions, particularly the armed forces and the police for all their efforts in protecting our homeland.

Our appreciation of sincere nations to understand the nature of events while flatly rejecting any attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of Egypt or to influence its sovereign decisions, whatever the direction might be.

Our thanks to all Egyptian and international media that report the news and events objectively and impartially while condemning those media that promote lies and falsify the truth in order to mislead world public opinion.

Our thanks to our honorable Muslim compatriots who have stood by our side, as far as they could, in defending our churches and our institutions.

Lastly, we address the international conscious and all national leaders that they understand and believe that what is happening in Egypt now is not a political struggle between different factions, but a war against terrorism.

In conclusion, we express our condolences to all families and relatives of the victims. We ask the Lord to heal all the injured."

+Ibrahim Isaac

Patriarch of Alexandria for Coptic Catholics

President of the Council of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Egypt

Two points merit underlining.

First, the statement contains a caution not to paint with too broad a brush. For every Muslim who torches a church or beats a Christian, there's also a Muslim who rushes in to help. Reports suggest, for instance, that many of the fires set at churches would have done far more damage had it not been for scores of Muslims who stepped in to help combat the flames.

That point would seem to offer a dose of hope about the possibilities for Muslim/Christian partnership on the other side of the crisis.

Second, the statement also contains a fairly blunt rebuke to Western policymakers inclined to take a "pox on both your houses" stance vis-à-vis both the Muslim Brotherhood protestors and the military

crackdown. According to the country's chief Catholic authority, at any rate, what's going on is not principally a political contest between two sides with legitimate grievances, but a war against terrorism.

Translation: Before condemning the army for its brutality, consider the alternative.

For the record, the leader of Egypt's Coptic Orthodox community, Pope Tawadros II, issued a similar statement at the same time supporting the police and military in their struggle against "dark terrorists, both internal and external."

At a bare minimum, that's something to ponder as the international community considers its policy choices. The voice from the trenches may not always be right, but it should always be heard.

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There is still no definitive word on the fate of Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, the pioneer in Christian/Muslim relations and activist against Syrian President Bashar Assad, who disappeared July 29 in Syria, reportedly at the hands of the militant "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant," the local equivalent of al-Qaida.

On Monday, the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights announced it received reports Dall'Oglio is still alive, though the group had pronounced him dead last week. In response, the vice minister of the Italian Foreign Ministry said a "small media war" appears to be underway among "cells that turn themselves into bearers of opposing messages."

Until Dall'Oglio surfaces or until objective observers have the chance to verify he's no longer alive, this cycle of claim and counter-claim will likely repeat itself, and there's no point becoming overly excited about each fresh rumor as it rolls out.

In the meantime, the uncertainty is a reminder of a hard truth: Egypt is hardly the only spot on the map these days where Christians are in the firing line.

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I'll be speaking Saturday at a Catholic stewardship conference in Dodge City, Kan. Information on the event can be found [here](#).

If there are any "All Things Catholic" readers in the area with nothing better to do on a Saturday afternoon than listen to me pontificate on Pope Francis and trends in the global Catholic church, come on down.

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Francis is rapidly turning into "the cold-call pope" given his penchant for picking up the phone and dialing total strangers for one reason or another. Here's a set of tips from a famous Italian columnist if you suddenly find yourself chatting on the phone with His Holiness.

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