

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 1, 2013 at 9:13am

Playin' church with Francis; the 'Bergoglio of Saskatchewan'; and Iraq

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

An old joke tweaking life in church circles goes like this: A dad is sitting in his living room when he hears a ruckus upstairs. He goes up and is startled to see the kids sitting in a circle on folding chairs, screaming their lungs out at each other: "You're an idiot!" "You're completely wrong and I can prove it!" and so on.

The father steps in and demands to know, "What in the world is going on here?"

"Ah, don't worry, dad," one of the kids says. "We're just playin' church."

However middling it may be as a punch line, the joke captures something real. Perhaps because religion is about people's deepest passions, it seems to breed division almost as reliably as devotion.

I've been using this joke on the lecture circuit lately because amid all the ferment generated by the new papacy, there's a risk that some Catholics may be tempted to "play church" with Pope Francis, turning what ought to be a tremendous missionary opportunity into yet another bone of contention.

No matter where one stands on the spectrum of reaction Francis has elicited, from the most enthusiastic to the most ambivalent, it's undeniable he's got the world's attention. In theory, that should represent a boon to the new evangelization, the effort to relight the church's missionary fires that became Catholicism's highest internal priority under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

One reliable method for squandering the momentum, however, would be to divert it into the church's internal battles. The world may now be looking at Catholicism in a new light, but if what it sees primarily is squabbling over who Francis is and what he represents, then he may remain a mere curiosity or pop

culture sensation, not an invitation to faith, and his magnetic pull may never extend to the church he leads.

For those most positively inclined to the new pope, the temptation to "play church" primarily means using the words and deeds of Francis as a club to beat up on other people in the church they don't like.

During the John Paul and Benedict years, one byproduct of the emphasis on Catholic identity under those popes was the emergence of a caste of self-appointed guardians of loyalty who ran around "outing" bishops, parishes, schools, hospitals and so on that they felt were insufficiently Catholic. Critics derisively dubbed them the "orthodoxy police," concluding that in at least some cases, this was mean-spirited and reflected an untoward lust for judgment.

One wonders if we're witnessing the emergence under Francis of an equal-and-opposite form of the same impulse, which we might term the "enlightenment police" -- people taking it upon themselves to pronounce whether someone is sufficiently humble, collaborative, forward-thinking, etc., to claim consistency with the direction being set by the new pope.

For a certain kind of liberal Catholic, the temptation to engage in such finger-pointing is probably especially strong. These are folks who felt the sting of charges of not "thinking with the church" for the last 35 years and who delight in the sense that the shoe is now on the other foot.

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One good rule of thumb, however, is that the best person to judge whether a given figure or group is consistent with Francis' vision is, well, Francis. His most ardent supporters might do well to resist the tug of setting themselves up as his *Mutaween* (the religious police in some Islamic societies), especially given that the spiritual cornerstone of his papacy is the importance of mercy.

On the other side of the equation, there are several constituencies in the church feeling angst over aspects of the new pope's direction, including:

- Some pro-life Catholics, who worry that his inclination to dial down the volume on abortion, gay marriage and contraception risks unilateral disarmament in the culture wars;
- Doctrinal purists, who think his shoot-from-the-hip style courts confusion on church teaching;
- Liturgical traditionalists, who don't see him fostering the same reverence for the church's worship they associate with Benedict XVI;
- Political conservatives, who fear that his emphasis on the social Gospel could shade off into an uncritical embrace of the agenda of the secular left;
- Church personnel, especially in the Vatican, who are weary of hearing the new boss take potshots at them because they don't see themselves as careerists or lepers infected with the trappings of a royal court.

For these folks, "playing church" occasionally may mean directly criticizing the pope. More often, however, it takes the form of accusing the media, in tandem with certain voices inside the church, of misrepresenting his message. One can already spot a new rhetorical trope, patrolling the borders between the "real Francis" and the "mythical Francis" of the popular imagination.

What avoiding "playing church" means for these folks is resisting the urge of a rush to judgment, and in the meantime, not feeling the need to push back against every bit of breathless commentary that floats through the ether.

Fr. John Wauck, an Opus Dei priest in Rome who's an expert on communications and a frequent commentator on church affairs, recently supplied a useful dose of perspective.

"It's important for everybody to calm down and look at the big picture," Wauck said.

"Pope Francis, the Successor of Peter, is the most popular man on the planet," Wauck observed, adding wryly: "There are worse things that could happen."

Indeed, and one of those "worse things" would be to see his popularity siphoned off as raw material for ecclesiastical infighting rather than galvanizing a new Catholic moment.

Good news for Saskatoon, Canada

The spectacle of Catholics in a diocese publicly calling for the ouster of their bishop is always a prescription for a media sensation, with the recent fracas surrounding Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst in Limburg, Germany, a good reminder of the point. When folks are basically content, however, the TV cameras rarely show up.

I visited one such place this week out in western Canada, in the diocese of Saskatoon, where virtually everyone I met felt they dodged a bullet Monday.

Oct. 28 was the day Pope Francis named a new archbishop for Winnipeg, who turned out to be Richard Joseph Gagnon of the Victoria diocese. There had been rumors the job might go instead to Bishop Donald Bolen of Saskatoon in part because each of Bolen's two predecessors had moved on to archbishop's jobs in Manitoba, the province where Winnipeg is located.

I was in Saskatoon to speak to the 70th annual convention of the Catholic Health Association of Saskatchewan, a gathering that drew a cross-section of local Catholic leaders. What I found was a widely held sense of relief that, at least for now, the 52-year-old Bolen is sticking around.

In the interests of full disclosure, Bolen is an old friend from the years my wife and I lived in Rome, where he worked in the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity before returning to Canada in late 2009.

Opening my talk, I semi-jokingly described Bolen as the "Bergoglio of Saskatchewan" because in many ways, he was Francis before Francis was cool.

Bolen's got the same splashes of humility and simplicity, the same commitment to a listening style of leadership, and the same zest for engaging people outside the church. He even has some of the same spiritual instincts -- while Francis' motto is *miserando atque eligendo*, which means roughly "by having mercy and by choosing," Bolen's is "mercy within mercy within mercy." Both reflect the same idea, though Francis drew his line from the Venerable Bede while Bolen harvested his from Thomas Merton.

I chided the crowd in Saskatoon by saying they ought to be willing to share Bolen with the rest of the church, which brought a firm rebuke from one of the leaders of the group, who took the floor to insist: "He's not going anywhere!"

The line brought down the house.

Of course, I'm sure that if I spent a little more time in Saskatoon, I could find somebody with a bone to pick. Moreover, Bolen isn't an isolated case in the sense that one can find Catholics devoted to their bishop in plenty of other places.

That said, my experience was a small reminder that just because we tend to focus on stories of rancor, the numerous instances of basically healthy relationships between shepherds and their sheep are no less real.

The plight of Christians in the Middle East

Many readers probably already have seen the moving recent letter by the Chaldean archbishop of Mosul in Iraq, Amel Shamon Nona, addressed to Western Christians about the persecution his church is facing.

The statistics about Christianity in Iraq are grim. In 1991, at the time of the first U.S.-led Gulf War, there were an estimated 1.5 million to 2 million Christians in the country, one of the largest Christian communities in the Middle East. Today, the high-end estimate for those left is around 500,000, while realistically, some people believe the total is lower still.

Hundreds of thousands of those Iraqi Christians have gone into exile, some in neighboring countries and some in the West, while thousands more have been killed. Nona notes that his predecessor in Mosul, Paulos Faraj Rahho, was shot to death in 2008, and Nona also says that the very day after his arrival in 2010 the father of a young man with whom he prayed in church was also slain.

Nona says persecution bring homes a fundamental spiritual truth.

"The Christian faith is not an abstract, rational theory, remote from actual, everyday life, but a means of discovering its deepest meaning, its highest expression as revealed by the Incarnation," he writes. "When the individual discovers this possibility, he or she will be willing to endure absolutely anything and will do everything to safeguard this discovery -- even if this means having to die in its cause."

Nona also describes the spiritual dangers of being a church of the catacombs.

"There is a great temptation to which persecuted Christians can fall victim and which I myself never tire of warning against: namely that because of being persecuted, we can, with the passing of time, end up becoming persecutors ourselves -- turning to violence in our way of thinking, in treating our neighbor, in our way of living."

"The sentiments we develop in a climate of persecution can change our way of living -- rejecting the Christian way which is imbued with love -- to a manner similar to that of those who demand and speak of justice only, but never of love," Nona writes.

"Let us be very careful not to live out our faith feebly because other Christians are suffering."

He also offers some thoughts on what Christians in the West can do to assist their suffering co-religionists.

"Help bring our situation to the notice of the world," he writes. "You are our voice."

Nona's letter was circulated by the Catholic relief organization Aid to the Church in Need, and more information can be found on its website: www.churchinneed.org.

The martyrdom of Iraqi Christianity is, of course, only one chapter in the broader story of anti-Christian persecution around the world, a story I try to tell in my new book, *The Global War on Christians*.

See John in person

This Sunday, I'll be at American Martyrs Catholic Church in Manhattan Beach, Calif., at 7 p.m. to provide "The Word from the Vatican." On Nov. 7, I'll be in Washington, D.C., at the 2013 Catholic Volunteer Network Conference, presenting a keynote on "The Era of the Laity: Trends since Vatican II in a Catholic Ethic of Volunteerism."

It would be terrific to see "All Things Catholic" readers in either venue.

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