

Transparency: The watchword in the Catholic world this week

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 6, 2009 All Things Catholic

Whenever high-profile stories break within a short span, commentators will often try to appear clever by finding some common thread. Frequently these are apples-and-oranges exercises which, in retrospect, seem rather forced; the sappy encomia linking Princess Diana and Mother Teresa simply because they died within six days of one another in 1997 offer a classic example.

Within the past seven days, three major stories on the Catholic news beat have raised eyebrows, stirred discussion, and generated diverse reactions both inside the church and out:

- A rare Vatican review, technically known as an "apostolic visitation," of women's religious communities in the United States was announced last Friday. The news came as a surprise to most leaders in religious life.
- Fallout from Benedict XVI's decision to lift the excommunication of four traditionalist bishops, including one who is a Holocaust denier, continued to spread, reaching an apex on Tuesday when German Chancellor Angela Merkel rebuked the pope. The next day, the Vatican issued a statement demanding that Bishop Richard Williamson recant his views "in absolutely unequivocal and public fashion."
- The Legionaries of Christ have acknowledged conduct by their founder, the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, which was "surprising, difficult to understand, and inappropriate for a Catholic priest." Reportedly, that conduct included fathering a child out of wedlock.

At the risk of straining to find a connection, I'd like to propose a lesson to be extracted from these three stories, one that can be expressed in a single word: Transparency.

The visitation

The two American sisters running the Vatican's visitation, Mother Clare Millea of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Sr. Eva-Maria Ackerman of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George, have taken pains to describe the project as a positive effort to support congregations. To their credit, they have broken new ground in transparency by launching a web site (<http://apostolicvisitation.org/en/index.html> [1]).

I interviewed Ackerman on Tuesday, and the text of that conversation can be found here:

<http://ncronline3.org/drupal/?q=node/3289> [2]. I also spoke with Millea on Friday, who said: "We feel that transparency is the most important tool of this whole visitation. There's no reason to hide what we're looking for."

Certainly Millea and Ackerman's upbeat tone, and their eagerness to answer questions, have done a great deal to reduce the anxiety felt by some religious. On the other hand, better communication beforehand could have ensured that much of this anxiety was never created in the first place.

The two major associations of women's congregations in the United States, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, received a fax announcing the visitation just a couple of hours before a news conference presenting the project to the world. Speaking on background, leaders among American women's congregations who travel regularly to Rome to meet with Vatican officials - including Cardinal Franc Rodé, Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the office that ordered the visitation - say that not once in these conversations did Rodé or anyone else offer a hint that a visitation might be in the works.

When news of a Vatican "investigation" drops essentially out of the clear blue sky, with no prior conversation about its motives or scope, the subjects of that investigation will naturally be on edge.

Fortunately, an opportunity to bolster transparency is just around the corner. Ackerman and Millea said that an *Instrumentum laboris*, or "working paper," for the visitation will be developed, as it was for the recent visitation of American seminaries and religious centers of formation. That document will lay out basic concerns and suggest a series of questions to be asked during visits. Releasing the *Instrumentum laboris* to the public, as was done with the seminary visitation, would be a big help; Millea said that's the plan.

These are challenging times for religious life, and there are tough questions to be faced. They're not merely managerial - how to handle personnel and property, for example, in an era of aging and declining membership - but also touch upon the identity of consecrated life. By itself, greater transparency will not make these issues less painful, and it won't magically dissolve disagreements among and within congregations, or between different generations of women religious, or between congregations in the States and their Vatican overseers.

Without transparency, however, those hard questions will be clouded by needless confusion over what's really going on. To be blunt, the Catholic church these days has plenty of naturally occurring angst - we don't need to generate it artificially.

Pope Benedict and the Holocaust

By now, a lifecycle to scandals under Benedict XVI has emerged. The pope says or does something controversial, eliciting sincere expressions of confusion, protest or even outrage in various quarters. The Vatican then engages in damage control, sending reassuring signals. Reasonable people generally accept those assurances, even if they scratch their heads about why the soothing gloss wasn't offered before the fact.

In the meantime, we reach the "piling on" stage, in which other people with essentially unrelated motives jump into the fray, joining the criticism of the pope in order to grind political axes - related either to internal Catholic

struggles, or to political agenda outside the church.

The Merkel comments offer a classic example. Holocaust denial is a crime in Germany, and undoubtedly the fact that Williamson's excommunication was lifted by a German pope added to the sense of outrage. Driven by public opinion, Merkel felt compelled to join the fray. Unfortunately, she was almost a week late: She demanded that Benedict XVI disavow Holocaust denial six days after he had done just that. The prior Wednesday, the pope had recalled his visits to Nazi death camps and the reality that millions of Jews had been killed during the Second World War.

Yet the bottom line is that even if some people are beating up on the pope for their own reasons, he's the one who handed them the club.

Responding to the tumult, the Vatican's Secretariat of State issued a statement on Wednesday asserting that Williamson's position on the Holocaust is "absolutely unacceptable and firmly rejected by the Holy Father," and that Williamson will have to recant if he wants any standing in the church. To be clear, this was not an about-face, but rather it made specific what the Vatican had in mind all along. The idea always was that lifting the excommunications marked the beginning of a process of reconciliation, the endgame of which would involve the traditionalists accepting official church teaching, including respect for Judaism. The obvious question, therefore, is why something like this statement wasn't issued from the beginning, rather than waiting for two weeks of backlash to build.

In that regard, one telling development is the number of senior churchmen who have broken the informal taboo on criticism of the Holy See. For example, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, said: "There must be also a certain criticism of the Vatican's staff practice, which obviously did not examine the matter carefully." Given that Schönborn was a key supporter of Benedict XVI in the conclave of 2005, and that he did his post-doctoral work under then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger at the University of Regensburg in the 1970s, one can safely assume that his remarks are not motivated by anti-papal animus.

In other words, even papal loyalists are coming to see that the meltdown illustrates a twin failure in transparency: One within the Vatican itself, in the sense that the proper people were not consulted, and the other in communication with the outside world.

(Editor's Note: Allen discussed this topic on the News Hour with Jim Lehrer:
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/video/share.html?s=news01n1e9fq723> [3])

Maciel and the Legionaries

The breakdown in transparency in the Maciel case is perhaps the most obvious of all. While the Legionaries have not confirmed any specific allegation against Maciel, privately Fr. Álvaro Corcuera, Maciel's successor as the order's superior, has informed members that this is not a matter of a one-time slip, but a pattern of conduct stretching over years.

Given that accusations of sexual abuse against Maciel first became public in 1997, and that the Vatican

instructed him to cease public ministry and live a life of "prayer and penance" almost three years ago, one could wonder why it's taken the Legionaries so long to come even this far.

To be fair, it is no easy matter for any religious congregation to acknowledge shortcomings in its founder. It's also worth recalling that Maciel did not step down as the superior until 2005, perhaps helping to explain why no internal review was possible until that time.

However belated, and arguably incomplete, the recent disclosures have been, the order's leadership nevertheless deserves credit for acknowledging an extraordinarily painful situation.

Now that the ice has been broken, hard questions will have to be faced about who knew what, who should have known, and when. In the meantime, one feels for so many well-meaning and idealistic Legionaries, as well as members of Regnum Christ (the order's lay arm), who must be experiencing confusion and hurt. That sensation is likely compounded by the fact that the order put up such a strenuous across-the-board defense of Maciel for so long.

The lesson to be learned - that avoiding hard truths is ultimately in no one's interest - is so obvious as to scarcely need further elaboration.

In sum, this week has brought home the imperative of a greater commitment to transparency, both inside the church (including within religious orders, and even within the Vatican) and with regard to the outside world.

One would think that this conclusion is so stunningly clear, so unavoidable, that it will swiftly result in changed practices. As I am fond of saying, however, the Catholic church was not built for speed. One can certainly pray that "His judgment cometh, and that right soon," but I wouldn't advise holding your breath.

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I'll write more about my conversation with Mother Clare Millea later, but for now there's one point that's fairly time-sensitive. In the first phase of the visitation, superiors general of the roughly 400 women's congregations in the United States will receive letters from Rodé inviting them to contact Millea for a personal appointment. The idea is that these conversations will help formulate the issues to be addressed during the visitation. The letters, Millea said, should go out at the beginning of next week.

One complication, however, is that there's no master mailing list for all 400 congregations in America, and Millea said she's concerned that a few superiors general might not get a letter. If that happens, Millea said the apostolic visitation Web site will also have details on how to contact her -- either to arrange a personal meeting, or to submit thoughts in writing. The bottom line, Millea said, is that she doesn't want anybody to feel excluded. The plan is for these meetings to begin immediately; Millea hopes to have them wrapped up by early August.

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[1] <http://apostolicvisitation.org/en/index.html>

[2] <http://ncronline3.org/drupal/?q=node/3289>

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