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The Vatican's changing relationship with Europe

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Last Friday, I was in Washington, for a symposium that brought together a number of prominent academic and policy analysts -- plus one plebian journalist -- to ponder religious trends in Europe and what they might mean for trans-Atlantic relationships.

In order to promote free discussion, the event was off-the-record. I don't think it violates anybody's trust, however, for me to share what I said, since that part belongs to me. I was asked to talk about thinking in the Vatican these days on Europe, and where things might be heading.

Other than light editing for length, the following is the gist of my presentation.

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Some of you know that for the last two years, I've been working on a project to identify what I call "Mega-Trends in Catholicism," meaning the most important forces shaping the Catholic future. For the sake of manageability, I've come up with a list of 10, which are:

1. World Catholicism
2. Secularism and Catholic Identity
3. Islam
4. The New Demography

5. Expanding Lay Roles
6. The Biotech Revolution
7. Globalization
8. Ecology
9. Multipolarism
10. Pentecostalism

It's important to say that this list is intended as a descriptive, not prescriptive, analysis. My aim is not to argue that these points represent where Catholicism *should* be going, but rather to identify where it actually *is* going. Today I'll attempt to pull out from this research a few implications for the Catholic church's approach to Europe. In broad strokes, the bad news is that Europe will be less important to the Catholicism of the future, and in particular the European Union may almost disappear as a subject of positive political interest. This does not suggest a retreat from public life in Europe, but rather an engagement of a qualitatively different sort.

I'll comment briefly on three mega-trends mostly directly related to our topic. I'll then describe their likely implications for Europe in terms of three transitions in Catholic thinking:

From pragmatism to principle; from politics to culture; and from the European Union to multipolar diplomacy.

Mega-Trends

1. World Catholicism

A church long dominated by Europe and the United States is becoming steadily more global. The most important bit of data is this: In 1900, just 66 million Catholics, representing 25 percent of the global Catholic total, lived in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Today 720 million of the 1.1 billion Catholics in the world live in those regions, representing 66 percent, or two-thirds, of all Catholics alive. That's an enormously rapid shift, and it implies a rising Southern tide in Catholicism over the 21st century. Mumbai, Nairobi and São Paulo will be to the 21st century what Paris and Milan were to the Counter-Reformation era in the 16th century, meaning the places where new energy first begins to stir. This will drive a far-reaching transformation of Catholic faith and practice.

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2. Secularism and Catholic Identity

In response to runaway secularization in Europe and other pockets of the West, Catholicism today is practicing what sociologists call a "politics of identity," aggressively reinforcing its traditional doctrines, rites, and devotional practices. It's a 21st century Catholic version of how Judaism responded to the destruction of the Temple and the reality of living in diaspora: "building a fence around the law." Just last week has seen two classic examples, with decisions from Pope Benedict XVI to widen use of the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, and a declaration from the Vatican that Catholicism is the lone true church willed by Christ.

3. Multipolarism

While the economic and military superiority of the United States will not vanish in the 21st century, the rise of a number of other states and non-state actors is creating a more "multi-polar" world with multiple centers of power and influence. Two clusters seem poised to be especially consequential: what Goldman Sachs calls the "BRIC" nations of Brazil, Russia, India and China, who together represent 40 percent of the world's population, and whose combined economies by 2040 are projected to be larger than those of the United States or Europe; and an emerging "Shi'a axis" from the Mediterranean to Central Asia, in which Iran will play a leadership role.

Policy Shifts for Europe

With regard to Europe, these mega-trends are driving what I would call three reevaluations of traditional Catholic reflection and activism.

1. From Pragmatism to Principle

While the media referred to a battle between "the Vatican" and the European Union over a proposed reference to God in the preamble to the new European constitutional document, insiders knew this wasn't quite accurate. In reality, "the Vatican," at least in terms of its diplomatic corps, regarded the so-called *invocatio Dei* as more symbolic than substantive. Their chief interest was in Article 52, which recognizes the juridical personality of religious bodies; stipulates that the constitution will not override national concordats with member states; and creates a mechanism for institutional dialogue between the EU and religious bodies. Though Vatican diplomats argued on behalf of the *invocatio Dei*, some felt that a constitution without it was acceptable as long as Article 52 remained intact.

The truth is that it was never the Vatican versus the EU over the "God clause"; it was Pope John Paul II versus the EU. When John Paul argued that a Europe without reference to its Christian heritage made no sense, he was not only attempting to persuade Brussels, he was also addressing sectors of Catholic opinion.

Under the weight of the Catholic identity movement, this intra-Catholic debate between pragmatism and principle has largely been resolved in favor of principle. The clearest possible statement came on March 24, when Pope Benedict XVI received a delegation of European politicians and bishops taking part in a conference celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, which was designed by its organizers to turn a new page in Vatican/EU relations. Instead, Benedict on that day accused Europe of being in "apostasy from itself," and argued that pragmatism is not "realistic" because it "denies ideas and values inherent in human nature."

What this suggests is that future Vatican policy on Europe will be more uncompromising and less amenable to *Realpolitik* solutions which aim to make a separate peace with secularism. This will have consequences across the board, but one area likely to be especially combustible is same-sex marriage and gay rights. A more identity-driven Catholicism may run up against the growing legal protection of homosexuality in Europe to produce legal action against the church under hate speech and anti-discrimination laws. One under-40 Catholic priest I know, in this case a Canadian though he might easily be European, tells me that among priests of his generation, it's taken for granted that some may go to jail for defending Catholic teaching on sexuality. It's reminiscent of the way Catholic priests in Eastern

Europe used to realistically accept that some of them might end up in Soviet gulags.

The church/state relationship in Europe will not always be quite this dramatic, but this shift does imply a more sharply defined and sometimes conflictual future.

2. From Politics to Culture

In the late John Paul years, there were three fairly clearly defined schools of thinking at the senior levels of Catholicism about the church's relationship with Europe: 1) the Vatican diplomacy school described above, based on striking pragmatic bargains; 2) the school around Cardinal Camillo Ruini of Italy, which held that Catholicism should aggressively challenge secularism, and that it still has the culture-shaping capacity to win on the political level here and now; and 3) the school around Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, which believed in an equally aggressive challenge to secularization, but had little hope for short-term success at the political level in today's European milieu, and therefore emphasized Christianity as a "creative minority" making its voice heard in philosophical debates over values and first principles.

Under Pope Benedict XVI, it should be no surprise that the third school is in the ascendant.

One illustration of the difference came in June 2005, when Ruini led a campaign to urge Italian voters to abstain from a national referendum that would have liberalized the country's law on in vitro fertilization. When a majority of Italians failed to vote, the referendum was invalidated, and the church claimed victory. The Ratzinger school welcomed the outcome, but some worried that it was a Pyrrhic victory because the underlying moral question was not settled. Privately, some would have preferred a clear "no" vote.

Vatican leaders today are also increasingly frustrated with accusations in Europe of what the Italians call *ingerenza*, or "interference," every time the church takes a position on a political debate, as if Catholicism seeks to impose a confessional position on a secular culture. From the point of view of church leaders, the church does not propose its teaching on the force of its own positive law, but rather because that teaching is true -- that is, it corresponds to deep ontological realities inscribed into the very nature of the human person. Partly for this reason, the International Theological Commission, the chief advisory body to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is today working on a document on Natural Law theory, meaning a mode of reasoning not based on confessional teachings or divine revelation, but rather on an analysis of nature which is, at least in principle, open to everyone.

This project will be the model of Vatican engagement with Europe in the future -- concerned with a long-term recovery of objective philosophical and moral criteria of discernment. Among other things, over time this may produce a fairly balanced Vatican approach to Muslim immigration in Europe -- concerned about a loss of Europe's Christian specificity, but welcoming a new cultural subgroup that shares much of its religious and moral agenda. In France, we already see the outlines of a Muslim/Catholic alliance versus the apostles of *laïcité*.

To be clear, this does not mean a retreat from political questions -- far from it. But it suggests an approach less focused on immediate outcomes than underlying concepts.

3. From the European Union to Multipolar Diplomacy

For most of its history, Vatican diplomacy has operated on what might be called a "Great Power" theory, meaning that the church would attach itself to the great Catholic power of the day and look to it to protect its interests and advance its concerns. For most of the post-World War II period, a fundamental diplomatic project of the Holy See was to promote the emergence of the European Union as the next Catholic, or at least Catholic-influenced, power.

Today, the wind has gone out of the sails of that project due to runaway secularization in Europe, and the growing hostility of secular elites to the church. As a practical matter, the Holy See today looks far more to the United States than to the EU as its natural interlocutor. Yet the experience of the Iraq War, coupled with historical Vatican ambivalence about the allegedly Calvinistic character of American culture, and more recent memories of conflict under the Clinton administration, make that alliance inherently unstable.

In the future, Catholicism is likely to pursue a more bric-a-brac diplomatic style, looking to different poles of a multipolar world as its natural allies on different questions. Specifically, one can look to a future in which the Vatican partners with the United States on questions of religious freedom and human rights, with Muslim states on the "culture wars," and with the developing nations of the South on matters of social justice.

The prospects for Catholic partnerships with Shi'a Islam will be particularly interesting to track, given what Vali Nasr has rightly identified as striking structural similarities between the two traditions: their emphasis on clergy and divine intermediaries; belief in intercessory prayer; popular feasts and devotions; the centrality of sacrificial death and atonement; and belief in tradition alongside scripture. Despite the current radicalization of Shi'a, Catholicism is arguably the global actor best positioned to engage it in dialogue. Those prospects may grow as below-replacement fertility levels in Iran begin to trigger a rapid aging of the population. As Phillip Longman has observed, aging societies tend to be peaceful ones, because they can't afford to maintain large armies and also pay for pensions and health care, and also because as children become more scarce, parents are less inclined to encourage them to blow themselves up.

Not only does a multipolar Vatican diplomacy leave Europe a bit out in the cold, it also promises sharper conflicts with Europe, and this time not just on gay rights. Catholic leaders from the global south are often bitterly critical of Europe and the United States on matters of economic justice and militarism; for example, many southern bishops talk about the World Bank and the IMF the way American bishops do Planned Parenthood, that is, as the church's central *bête noire*. Perceptions of unfair trading practices in Europe, especially its massive agricultural subsidies, are a matter of deep southern Catholic resentment. Under the impress of multipolar diplomacy, we might anticipate a future in which the flashpoints of church/state relations in Europe could be expressed as "sex, secularism, and subsidies."

Conclusion

None of what I've said should be read to mean that the Vatican, or global Catholicism, has thrown in the towel on Europe. In many ways, from the Catholic point of view, Europe is simply too big to fail. Joseph

Ratzinger was elected pope in part because many cardinals believed that addressing the European crisis is the most important challenge facing Catholicism, and the new pope's choice of the name "Benedict," with reference to the founder of European monasticism, was a way of signaling where his interests reside.

But the church's approach to Europe in the 21st century will be different, focused on fostering Catholic sub-cultures and addressing the deep currents of intellectual history, rather than presuming a shared core of basic values which can lead to strategic partnerships. It will be different, but it certainly will not be dull.

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