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Cardinal George's thoughts on the American church

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 4, 2007 All Things Catholic

I was in Chicago this week, speaking on Thursday to the Illinois Catholic Health Association on "Trends in Ministry." While in town I arranged an interview with Cardinal Francis George, who marks his 10th anniversary this year at the helm of the one of the largest and wealthiest dioceses in the world. If things hold to form, George will also take over as the new president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at their fall meeting in Baltimore Nov. 12-15, becoming, in effect, the public face of the church just as America plunges into an election cycle.

That combination makes George an important figure indeed in the Catholic firmament.

Widely regarded as the deepest thinker among the American cardinals, George has had his ups and downs in Chicago over the last decade. He acquired an early reputation as "Francis the Corrector," overly given to issuing directives even on minor matters, and has faced more recent accusations of failure to act against a Chicago priest, Daniel McCormack, despite credible reports of sexual abuse. That episode was a special blow, given that George had played a leadership role in the American bishops' response to the sexual abuse crisis. Nonetheless, George has also won considerable admiration for his intellect and personal graciousness, and his battle to recover from cancer in 2006 generated wide sympathy.

Today, Fr. Andrew Greeley, a noted Chicago priest, sociologist and novelist, says his impression is that George is "enormously popular" in the city. Some of that, Greeley concedes, has to do with the simple fact of being a cardinal. Some of it, however, Greeley believes, is also attributable to George's personality - witty, comfortable with the press and the public, and just unpredictable enough to keep people on their toes. (To be fair, Greeley is not exactly an impartial observer when it comes to George; the two men are friends, and the day I had breakfast with Greeley he was taking the cardinal to the opera that afternoon.)

Highlights from my interview with George, which took place in his downtown office on Oct. 2, include:

- George called some moves by the church following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), such as downplaying fasting and holy days, "sociologically naïve," in the sense that the loss of those practices has eroded Catholic identity;
- He argued that problems of Catholic identity plague both the Catholic right and left, with the right often accepting the faith but not the bishops, and the left sometimes willing to cut the bishops a break but in doubt about the faith;
- George said he does not foresee widespread use of the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, despite Pope Benedict

XVI's recent decision to permit the old Mass without authorization from local bishops. Most Catholics, he said, instinctively feel, "That's not where we are";

- George said the American bishops have asked for clarification from the Vatican as to whether the pre-Vatican II rite can be used during Holy Week, a question made acute by a controversial Good Friday prayer for the conversion of the Jews;
- If the old rite can be used in Holy Week, George said, a more positive prayer for the Jews from the new liturgy will "probably" be substituted for the old one - though at the same time, George said, this discussion could also be an occasion to ask Jews to renounce unflattering depictions of Jesus in the Talmud;
- George frankly admitted that the bishops are "not of one mind" on the question of refusing communion to pro-choice Catholic politicians, and he doesn't expect a uniform national policy in the 2008 elections;
- For himself, George expressed great reluctance to "manipulate" worship by publicly denying communion in order to make a political point, even in the service of a good cause;
- In general, George defended recent critical notices about theologians put out by the Vatican, such as the 2004 critique of American Jesuit Fr. Roger Haight - though he candidly said that a 2001 notification on Belgian Jesuit Fr. Jacques Dupuis, who wrote on Christianity and other religions, was "not well thought out";
- George confirmed that if elected, he plans to serve as president of the American bishops, a role in which he said he will have the opportunity to "shape conversations" on the national stage.

Excerpts from our interview follow. The full text can be found in the Special Documents section of NCRonline.org: Cardinal George Interview [1].

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NCR: In March, Cardinal Bertone gave an address to the Ethics and Finance Association in the city of Milan. Asked to express the "main objective" of Benedict's pontificate, he offered this formula: "To recover authentic Christian identity and to explain and confirm the intelligibility of the faith in the context of widespread secularism." Why the concern with identity?

Cardinal George: I think there are two sides to that. One is what John Paul II often said, that there are whole cultures that used to be shaped by the faith but that aren't shaped by the faith any longer. The culture the present Holy Father, Benedict XVI, is most concerned about is that of Western Europe and its cultural colonies, like our own country. In that particular culture, individualism is so embedded that the loss of a collective identity is rampant. Each one feels not only free but obliged to determine his or her own religious identity, so we have a plethora of understandings of what it means to be Catholic as well as what it means to be human and what it means to be anything else. It's hard to bring that all together, because the culture doesn't foster any kind of collective identity ? Depending upon whether you're left or right, as we define those terms in the culture today, you have trouble with one [element of Catholic identity] or the other. The right would say, 'I accept all the faith, but I can't stand the bishop,' while on the other hand the left says, 'The faith is goofy, but my bishop's not a bad guy.'

On the subject of religious identity, sociologists Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge talk about the distinction between "high tension" and "low tension" religion, arguing that over time low tension groups tend to dissolve into secularism.

That's right. In the '60s, it was very important to show you could be American and Catholic. Whole magazines were devoted to that. There was a collective sigh of relief at the Second Vatican Council, with human freedom being so much in the forefront of the conciliar concerns, that the tension wasn't there anymore. I think some of the moves of the church in that period now seem sociologically naïve, in their long-term consequences.

What do you have in mind?

Catholicism as a distinctive way of life was defined by eating habits and fasting, and by days especially set aside that weren't part of the general secular calendar. They were reminders that the church is our mediator in our relationship to God, and can enter into the horarium [calendar] that we keep, into the foods that we eat, into all the aspects of daily life, into sexual life. Once you say that all those things can be done individually, as you choose to do penance, for example, you reduce the collective presence of the church in somebody's consciousness. At that point, the church as mediator becomes more an idea for many people. Even if they accept it, it's not a practice. So then when the church turns around and says 'You have to do this,' then resistance is there to say, 'How can you tell me that? I'm deciding on my life for myself, and you even told me I could!'

So what's the answer? Is it rebuilding a subculture?

I suppose it is, though not in a way that's divorced from the culture that we have now, which is ours - what else are we? ? Ordinary lay people are to consecrate the world from within the world, as their world, not to be separate from it. If there is a subculture, it would have to be developed naturally in relationship to today's crisis, as earlier institutions were at one point. You can't go back, I think, and imagine that we're in the 19th century, just taking those solutions, good though they were then, to be ours now.

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The Holy Father's recent motu proprio *broadening permission for celebration of the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass is one focus of identity concerns. Do you anticipate widespread use of the old Mass?*

Since you have over half the presbyterate who really can't handle Latin, I don't see huge numbers. Among the others who could handle it, they made a decision after the council that they're not going to use Latin again. For them, it's a matter of principle. Therefore, 'widespread' isn't going to happen, I don't think, at least for the next several years ? I haven't seen wide demand for it. Nobody's written me letters saying, 'Ah, now at last we can do this.'

Prior to the release of the motu proprio, *I wrote an op/ed piece for the New York Times in which I argued that this would be one of those classic Vatican documents which, because of its symbolic importance, generates a lot of debate, but practically changes little on the ground. Does that seem right to you?*

We'll see, but it made sense to me when I read it, and it still makes sense to me now. Symbolically, it is important, mostly because the pope wants to insist that there was no rupture [between the pre- and post-Vatican

II periods], and it shouldn't have been treated as a rupture. The old Mass is there now, extraordinary but nonetheless present, as a kind of template to draw people into perhaps a more reverential celebration of the Eucharist. It's there, and that's helpful. On the other hand, most of the practicing Catholics I know, including those in my own family, who have always been good Mass-goers and who have nothing against the Tridentine rite, remember it and appreciate it, but they say, 'We're somewhere else now.'

A related issue with the old Missal is the Good Friday liturgy, and specifically the prayer for the conversion of the Jews. Where do you think we are with that?

First of all, we have to clarify something, because there are two opinions and we've asked the Holy See to clear this up. During the Triduum [the end of Holy Week] you may not have a private Mass. So the first reaction is, well, that means you can't use the old Missal for the Triduum, so that's the end of that. Others come back and say no, that if you have a parish that is only Tridentine, then they would also have the Holy Week ceremonies from that Missal. I'm not sure that's permitted, and that's what we're asking.

If it is, would your preference be to use the language of new Missal for this prayer on Good Friday, even when people are celebrating the Tridentine rite?

If you're celebrating the 1962 Missal, that would involve changing the text of the prayer.

That can be done, yes?

Of course it can be done, and I suspect it probably will be, because the intention is to be sure that our prayers are not offensive to the Jewish people who are our ancestors in the faith. We can't possibly insult them in our liturgy ? Not that any group has a veto on anybody's prayers, because you can go through Jewish texts and find material that is offensive to us. But if we're interested in keeping the dialogue strong, and we have to be, we should be very cautious about any prayer that they find insulting. 'They,' however, is a big tent. What my Jewish rabbi friend down the block finds insulting is different from what Abraham Foxman [national director of the Anti-Defamation League] finds insulting. Also, it does work both ways. Maybe this is an opening to say, 'Would you care to look at some of the Talmudic literature's description of Jesus as a bastard, and so on, and maybe make a few changes in some of that?'

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Another arena in which these identity tensions play themselves out is the question of Catholics in public life. Are we going to see a replay in 2008 of the tensions that surrounded the issue of communion for pro-choice Catholic politicians in 2004?

It depends what the media wants to play up. The bishops are not of one mind in approaching this question, and so that division can be played upon, in which case it will be with us. There are some who would say it's a moral theology question about the conscience of the individual.

Meaning that it's their business to make the proper decision?

Yes, [this view holds] that it's our business to instruct them, it's their business to make the decision. Others would say that it's not entirely that, because there's also public scandal, and therefore the public law of the church comes in. You have a canon that says the minister of communion, not the bishop, is to determine if it's a case of public scandal, then someone is to be refused communion. But that's the minister giving communion on the spot. The bishop can either encourage that or discourage that, but in the canon itself it is first of all the minister giving communion at the time who makes that decision ? the celebrant, or the extraordinary minister of the Eucharist, or the deacon, or whoever's giving communion.

To take the case of the Catholic seemingly most likely to become a major party nominee, if Rudy Giuliani is the Republican candidate and he shows up for Mass in the Archdiocese of Chicago, would you give him communion?

I don't think he's married in the church, so that's an easy one. We wouldn't even get to the question of his position on abortion.

Would you agree that both the debates over liturgy and over Catholics in public life are rooted in a push for greater clarity about what makes Catholicism distinct - in other words, Catholic identity?

Yes. It is scandalous that after so many years of the church's constant teaching that you have so many Catholic politicians for whom this is a non-issue ? The question is, do you use a sacramental moment to address that, and risk politicizing the sacrament? That's my biggest concern. The very sacrament that speaks about our unity becomes the occasion for this kind of fracas and disunity. I think we should think long and hard before we allow the Eucharist to become that ? The problem is instrumentalizing the Eucharist and the church, even for a good cause. Worship should never be manipulated by anybody. Worship is worship, even for a good cause. I feel strongly about that.

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One more focus for identity questions is the extent to which traditional Christological doctrines can be pushed to provide space for a positive theological reading of other religions. News that the Vatican is investigating Fr. Peter Phan is the latest case in point. Many critics say that when the Vatican goes after someone like that, it freezes normal academic give-and-take. Do you think there's merit to that criticism?

It would be more credible if, before the Holy See said anything, the academic community did react with anything other than kudos to the most aberrant kind of Christologies that are presented.

To take a concrete case, the notification on [Jesuit Fr. Jacques Dupuis] came out in January 2001. Looking back, would you say it's had a positive effect on theological discussion?

I think that's an intervention that wasn't thought out well enough before it was made. I think the discussion that followed after the intervention should have taken place before the intervention was made ? I think that was an unfortunate example, but I don't think it's typical. By the time the process is over, usually there is a careful reading [of the theologian's work]. The initial reaction might be too broad, but that's the purpose of bringing the author, the theologian, into the discussion, to make sure that you're not misrepresenting them.

Is there a move these days to try to handle more of these cases at the local level rather than dealing with them from Rome?

I think that's clear. Cardinal Ratzinger, when he was head of the congregation, asked that the doctrinal committees of the various bishops' conferences do their own work for cases of problematic theological works in their own countries. The present prefect is certainly following that advice, and is going to be asking more and more, 'Would you please attend to this yourself? Why should every case like this become a case for the Holy See?'

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Assuming that your brother bishops elect you as president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, is it your intention to accept?

I think that if you put your name forward, obviously you have to accept if you're elected. The time to make that decision is when they ask if you'll be put on the list.

So if elected, you'll serve?

I put my name forward, so of course.

From a PR point of view, you become the face of the church in the United States.

Yes, and that's scary in a way, because symbol becomes more important than function very often. It is a symbolic post. It's a tremendous responsibility, and you can make mistakes, and that's something to be considered. But you can also shape a conversation sometimes, and say something that would be helpful.

Any particular conversation you're looking forward to shaping?

Catholic identity is a good place to start.

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