

Many are curious about Vatican's take on '08 presidential race

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 21, 2008 All Things Catholic

Next week, the annual "Catholic Social Ministry Gathering" will take place in Washington, D.C. Sponsored by 19 Catholic organizations, it's an important annual get-together for Catholics who, in one way or another, are involved in social action and political advocacy on behalf of human life, justice and peace.

The theme is "Faithful Citizenship: Promoting Life and Dignity, Justice and Peace," a reference to the U.S. bishops' recent document on Catholics and the '08 elections. I'll be on the scene covering the event for *NCR*, both our Web site and the print edition. (I will also, by the way, be standing in for David Brooks on a panel with Mark Shields towards the end of the agenda.)

Inevitably, the elections and the question of the "Catholic vote" will be much in the air. It's likely, too, that talk around the edges will focus on how Pope Benedict XVI's upcoming April 15-20 visit to the United States might be read in terms of the dynamics of an election year.

I can certainly guarantee that the question of political fallout from the pope's visit will be much on the minds of journalists covering it, having already taken part in several meetings and conference calls with TV producers gearing up for Benedict's arrival. (Not everyone is focused on politics, however; one producer from the Los Angeles market asked me if she could expect any "celebrity presence" during the pope's stay, obviously construing Benedict's agenda by way of comparison with the Dali Lama and Richard Gere. I patiently tried to explain that Robert De Niro or Al Pacino would not be introducing the Holy Father at gala fundraisers.)

I spoke at the lovely Cathedral of St. Francis in Metuchen, New Jersey, Tuesday night, and I also sensed curiosity about the political dimension of the pope's trip at the Catholic grass roots.

Because neither of the presidential candidates in '08 is likely to be Catholic, Benedict at least will not have to face questions about whether he would give communion to John McCain, Barak Obama or Hillary Clinton. Pundits and news producers will, however, be scouring the pope's commentary to see if it seems to cut in one direction or another. If he delivers a strong pro-life message, that might be spun as favoring the Republicans; if he accents the church's stands against the war, that might be seen as a boon for the Democrats among Catholic voters.

If, as is likely, he makes all of these points in some form, the picture will obviously be more muddled.

Trying to think beyond sound-bites, however, requires standing back from the immediate question of which candidate or party stands to gain the most from the pope's presence, and asking deeper questions about just what it might be that Benedict hopes to accomplish.

In my experience of covering the Vatican over the last several years, two notes tend to dominate when officials

look across the water at the United States.

First, Vatican officials tend to see the United States as a bulwark against secularism, especially in contrast with contemporary realities in Western Europe. Despite the fact that one can certainly find strong pockets of secularism in America, especially among elites, the reality is that the United States remains a deeply religious culture. In the most recent global values survey by the Pew Forum, 59 percent of Americans said religion is "very important" to them, in contrast to 21 percent of the Germans, for example, and 11 percent of the French. The recent European debate about a "God clause" in the constitutional document of the E.U. would be unthinkable here. Alistair Campbell – the communications director for former prime minister Tony Blair – may have captured social reality in Great Britain when he told a *Vanity Fair* reporter that "we don't do God," but that's not America. Here, one popular diagnosis of the 2004 elections was that the Democrats lost in part because they didn't "do God" credibly.

As the distinguished sociologist Peter Berger puts it, the United States is "a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes." India is one of the world's most intensely religious societies, while few places on earth are as ultra-secular as today's Sweden.

The cornerstone of Benedict XVI's social message is the peril of a society constructed *etsi Deus non daretur*, "as if God does not exist." In the developed West, at any rate, he's far more likely to sell that message in the United States than in the salons and parliaments of Europe.

On that score, Benedict and the senior leadership of the Vatican are appreciative of those forces in American society that seem most respectful of religion, and most committed to fostering a robust role for faith-based groups in public affairs. In practical terms in American politics, that often means the Republicans. The fact that Republicans are also more likely to be pro-life obviously also creates a favorable inclination.

At the same time, the Vatican also looks to the United States as the great patron and guarantor of human rights, especially religious freedom, around the world, and on that score the recent foreign policy choices of the American government have caused deep alarm. During my last trip to Rome in late January, a senior Vatican official described a meeting he'd recently attended with ambassadors to the Holy See, many of whom had reported a "rising tide" of anti-American sentiment in their nations based on the U.S.-led war in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, renditions, and a host of other issues related to the war on terror.

For those reasons, the Vatican is also inclined to favor those forces in American politics most likely to end the war and to pursue a multi-lateral foreign policy that might restore the moral standing of the United States. In practical terms, of course, to some extent that means the Democrats.

If this were Europe in the 19th or early 20th century, the solution to this dilemma would be obvious: create an American Catholic political party, like the *Zentrum*, or Center Party, in pre-war Germany, or the Christian Democrats in post-war Italy. As detached as they can sometimes be from American realities, however, even Vatican diplomats understand that's a non-starter here.

In light of these considerations, I suspect the political subtext of Benedict's April trip is unlikely to have much to do with the dynamics of the '08 elections, since the Holy See, in tandem with many American Catholics, regards both parties as flawed. Instead, I suspect Benedict is likely to try an "end-run" around partisan politics, and talk instead about the formation of a Catholic culture in the United States capable of acting as a "leaven" within the existing formations, trying to transform them from the inside out.

That's a more ambitious, and long-term, aim than sending signals about McCain, Obama or Hillary, but it's likely to be Benedict's message. What the pundits and spin-doctors do with it, of course, is another question.

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