

Giving a name to historical change

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 14, 2008 All Things Catholic

On Tuesday I was in Dayton, Ohio, where the University of Dayton put together a panel to discuss my argument that "evangelical Catholicism" constitutes a mega-trend in Catholic life. Aside from me, the panelists were William Portier, who holds the Mary Ann Spearin Chair in Catholic Theology at the University of Dayton; and David J. O'Brien, Loyola Professor of Roman Catholic Studies at the College of the Holy Cross.

Both Portier and O'Brien had used the phrase "evangelical Catholicism" before I did. What became clear on Tuesday was that each of us thinks "evangelical Catholicism" is important, but each of us is actually talking about something quite different.

Our audience of perhaps 200 was composed largely of 20-something students. Una Cadegan, director of the American Studies program at the University of Dayton, introduced our conversation this way:

"You know that something is changing in society, in history, in culture, when you have to find a name for it," Cadegan said. "Sometime within the last decade or so, a number of different people at more or less the same time realized they needed a name for things that were changing, especially among younger Catholics. ? The name that came to be attached to this changing way of being Catholic at the beginning of the 21st century was 'evangelical Catholicism.' The ideas surrounding it are still taking shape, which makes it a powerful and interesting moment to start talking about it."

I kicked things off by summarizing what I mean, and don't mean, by "evangelical Catholicism." I don't have in mind primarily Catholic adaptation of styles of belief and worship associated with evangelical Protestantism, such as high-octane praise and worship or a strong personal relationship with Jesus. Neither am I talking about the root sense of "evangelical" as a radical witness to the values of the gospel, though both in a sense are part of the picture.

Instead, what I'm trying to describe is the most powerful current at the policy-setting level of the church, as well as a dynamic constituency at the Catholic grassroots. It pivots on three points:

- A strong reaffirmation of traditional markers of Catholic belief, language and practice. Examples include the revitalization of the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, reassertion that Catholicism alone possesses the fullness of what it means to be "church," and rejection of theological tendencies that would put Christ on

- the same level as other saving figures;
- Bold public assertion of those markers of identity;
 - Personal embrace of those markers of identity, as opposed to simply imbibing them from traditional Catholic cultures, neighborhoods and families.

Defined this way, "evangelical Catholicism" can be understood as a response to secularism and what Benedict XVI calls the "dictatorship of relativism," protecting the church against assimilation by emphasizing what makes Catholicism distinct.

As I explained in Dayton, I had originally referred to this mega-trend as the "Catholic identity movement," but that drew fire from liberal Catholics who argued that reaffirming traditional belief and devotion, such as the Latin Mass, is not the only way to articulate a strong Catholic identity. Since I'm trying to describe this movement, not to pass judgment on it, I went back to the drawing board in search of a more neutral nomenclature. In the end, I settled on "evangelical Catholicism" because it captures the sense of a public assertion of traditional Catholic identity in the context of a highly pluralistic, secular culture.

(Whether the label will stick remains to be seen. Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, for one, has predicted that it won't have "staying power," writing in a recent issue of *First Things* that what I'm talking about is really just "Catholicism," no more and no less.)

In our conversation at Dayton, no one disputed that what I'm describing is indeed a powerful force in the church, though it seemed less clear that "evangelical Catholicism" is how anyone else would express it.

Portier, for example, said that he would use the term "evangelical Catholicism" to describe something else, a current he said he began to detect several years ago when he was teaching at the College of Mt. St. Mary in Emmitsburg, Maryland. At the time, a reporter for *The New York Times* wrote a cover story about the gung-ho Catholicism of the seminarians at Mt. St. Mary's, which Portier said brought a rebuke from *Commonweal* magazine -- complaining that the seminary seemed to be preparing priests for the 1950s.

"I lived through the 1950s," Portier said, "and these people weren't anything like the 1950s. This was something different."

When Portier moved to Dayton, he said he found a similar spirit stirring among the students.

"I would get these students that conventional wisdom and my peers would call conservative," he said. "They liked to go to Eucharistic adoration, and they didn't think the pope was a freaking idiot. They'd wear t-shirts that said, 'Top Ten Reasons to be Catholic.' Yet they also did all the things my liberal colleagues would want them to do, like going on service trips and being worried about the poor."

This category-bending synthesis of left and right, Portier argued, is the result not of internal Catholic tussles, but the larger cultural realities in America of pluralism and the dissolution of a traditional Catholic subculture.

"These students have been converted [to a strong form of Catholicism.] They've been intentionally drawn to it from out of the maelstrom of pluralism," Portier said. "It's not because the pope said so, or some action of coercion by authority. They've been attracted to it, in evangelical fashion."

In a highly pluralistic culture without a strong subculture, Portier said, the promotion of evangelical Catholicism strikes him as a "sociological no-brainer."

"You either evangelize," he said, "or you die."

O'Brien offered yet another version of "evangelical Catholicism." He said his own use of the term grew out of his experience of promoting Catholic social ministry across the country in the 1970s and 1980s -- mostly, he joked, in a series of church basements.

"More and more, I noticed people reflecting on their experience not on the basis of official church teaching," O'Brien said, "but in terms of the gospel and what Jesus would want them to do."

Like Portier, O'Brien said he was especially influenced by his students.

"The students I really admired, who were involved in service programs and immersion experiences, would come together for sharing about what they were doing, and their talk usually revolved around the gospel, the New Testament," he said.

O'Brien said that as he reflected upon it, such behavior has deep American roots. He invoked the memory of Fr. Isaac Hecker, the 19th century founder of the Paulist order.

"Hecker believed that real Americans were blank slates, people who had shed the ancient prejudices of the old world," O'Brien said. "He understood that you had to speak to them in terms of inner convictions, and how Christianity responds to their deepest hungers, yearnings and needs."

"Historically, all Christians in America eventually become in some way evangelical," O'Brien said, arguing that American Christians emphasize scripture as the source of authority, rely on personal conviction and conversion, and support that personal faith in voluntary congregations. It was this basic "Americanization" of Catholicism, O'Brien said, which he saw happening in the 1970s and '80s.

In many ways, O'Brien sees his version of evangelical Catholicism as preferable to that described by Potier, or by me, which he characterized as betraying a "separatist" impulse." While O'Brien said he's all for celebrating the "great riches of the Catholic heritage," he argued this shouldn't be our prime concern.

"What we should be worried about is not the Catholic church for itself," O'Brien said, "but its engagement on behalf of everybody -- all Americans and, eventually, the rest of the world." In that sense, he argued, any

recovery of Catholic identity should be "for the sake of fuller, not lesser, participation in the broader culture."

O'Brien warned that current trends in the church -- meaning principally today's emphasis on recovery of traditional Catholic identity -- could cause Catholics "to lose sight of our larger responsibility for the fate of the human family and for the outcome of history."

The most interesting bits from the rest of the discussion came in exchanges between Portier and O'Brien, old friends bound by deep mutual respect, but who nevertheless see things a bit differently. Portier, for example, suggested that Catholics can't meaningfully engage the broader culture without some clear sense of who they are or why they're doing it.

"I don't see how people can be concerned about ecumenism, social justice, interreligious dialogue, or any of the other issues that liberal Catholics would love, unless they're located somewhere," Portier said. "That doesn't have to be a fortress, but it does have to have some kind of theological shape."

O'Brien argued that such a "shape" should emerge from experience, not diktat.

"It has to be formed out of the on-going pastoral experience of the American Catholic people, not some kind of top-down project," O'Brien responded. "You've got to listen to people who are in pastoral ministry, you've got to take lay people seriously and not marginalize them, and build your restoration of identity out of that. We were beginning to do that pretty well, and we turned back the clock on it."

Perhaps the funniest moment came when O'Brien insisted that he takes church teaching very seriously, saying that he's even carried a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church into RCIA meetings.

"Did you have it in a brown paper bag?" Portier shot back, to gales of laughter.

Since both Portier and O'Brien have defined their versions of "evangelical Catholicism" in part on the basis of their experience of young people, it's perhaps appropriate that the last word from Tuesday belong to them.

While the students in Dayton didn't make speeches, they did ask several questions, and many seemed to express a desire to overcome dualisms sometimes generated in post-Vatican II Catholic debates between liberals and conservatives. One young woman, for example, said she's drawn to both a deep Catholic piety and strong social commitment. Where does that locate her, she asked, in terms of evangelical Catholicism?

My own stab at an answer was that she seemed to be expressing what Benedict XVI described last July, in a session with priests from the northern Italian dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso, as the historical genius of Catholicism -- its capacity for synthesis.

"Catholicism, perhaps a bit simplistically, has always been considered the religion of the great 'both/and,' " Benedict said, "not of great exclusions, but of synthesis. In fact, 'Catholic' means precisely 'synthesis.'"

In that sense, I told the young woman, her instinct seems right on the money. The notion that one has to choose between Eucharistic devotion and care for the poor, for example, comes more from secular ideology than from Catholic thought.

For many of these young Catholics at the University of Dayton, that answer seemed to correspond with their own instincts -- suggesting, perhaps, that however we eventually define it, this thing called "evangelical Catholicism" may have some legs.

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News on Thursday that kidnapped Chaldean Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul, Iraq, died in captivity has jolted the Catholic world. Rahho had been kidnapped Feb. 29, in a shootout in which three of his companions were killed. Pope Benedict XVI and numerous other Catholic leaders had appealed for his release.

As of this writing, there were still unanswered questions about the incident. Although it's presumed that his kidnapers were Islamic militants, no specifically religious motive was ever expressed, and demands of up to \$2.5 million in ransom suggest that the act may have been driven largely by hopes for a financial windfall. It's also not clear at this point whether Rahho died at the hands of his abductors, or due to his already precarious health.

All of that, however, is likely to fade into the background, as many will see Rahho's death in terms of the on-going assault on the Christian community in Iraq, which has prompted a Christian exodus out of the country, as well as broader Muslim/Christian tensions around the world.

On Thursday, the Vatican released this statement:

"News of the death of Archbishop Rahho, kidnapped in recent days, struck the Holy Father with deep sorrow, who was quickly informed.

"We had all continued to hope and to pray for his liberation, as the pope had requested several times in his appeals.

"Sadly the most absurd and unjustified violence continues to rage against the Iraqi people, and in particular the small Christian community, to whom the pope and all of us feel especially close in prayer and in solidarity in this moment of great sadness.

"It is hoped that this tragic event will recall all parties, once more and with renewed effort, especially the international community, to work for the pacification of a country that has suffered so greatly."

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Sometimes there's less to a news story than meets the eye. Such may be the case, for example, with news this week that former Episcopal Bishop Clarence Pope of Fort Worth, Texas, who had left the Episcopal church twice before to become Catholic, has once again rejoined the Episcopalians.

Pope (still, it must be said, the most striking surname imaginable for an Anglo-Catholic convert) came into communion with the Catholic church in the mid-1990s, with ambitions of creating a formal juridical structure inside Catholicism, such as a personal prelature, for ex- members of the Anglican Communion. Those plans stalled, in part because of reservations from the American bishops about implications for ecumenical relations with the Episcopalians. Pope's personal hopes to be ordained a Catholic priest also ran into complications, and eventually he returned to the Episcopal church.

Last summer, Pope "swam the Tiber" anew, part of a wave of four Episcopal bishops who came into communion with Rome. The others were Dan Herzog of Albany, Jeffrey Steenson of New Mexico and Texas, and John Lipscomb of Southwest Florida. Two weeks ago, Steenson convened a meeting of the four men in Houston, Texas, informally launching a sort of "support group" that could eventually include other Episcopal clergy and laity who join the Catholic church. Pope was supposed to attend, but pulled out at the last minute.

Last weekend, Pope attended the Eucharist at St. Patrick's Episcopal parish in Zachary, Louisiana, which has been interpreted as a sign of his return to the Episcopal church.

Some may be tempted to interpret Pope's peregrinations in terms of broader ecumenical dynamics, but sources involved in Catholic/Episcopal relations over the years say that it's more about Pope's personal situation, including frustration with his attempts to be ordained, than any broad policy on the Catholic side regarding former Episcopal clergy.

In other words, those sources say, there's less "there" there in the Pope story than a first glance might suggest.

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Chiara Lubich, the 88-year-old founder of the Focolare Movement, died early this morning at her home south of Rome. You can read more about this on my Daily Posting: [Chiara Lubich, founder of Focolare movement, dies at 88](#) [1].

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