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Public spotlight on a personal conversion; Papal trip prep; 1978 and Catholic life

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 28, 2008 All Things Catholic

Rarely does an Easter Vigil Mass become a news event, but this year's edition in St. Peter's Basilica certainly got the world's attention. The reason: One of seven new Catholics personally baptized by Pope Benedict XVI happens to be an Egyptian-born Italian journalist and convert from Islam, widely regarded as the successor to Oriana Fallaci in terms of visceral protest against Muslim extremism.

Magdi Allam, 55, formerly a self-described "secular Muslim," had long expressed affinity for Catholicism. He's a star attraction, for example, at the annual Communion and Liberation meeting in Rimini. In itself, Allam's conversion thus came as no great surprise. The fact that Benedict baptized and confirmed Allam personally in such a high-profile setting, however, was taken in some quarters as a provocation.

Allam added fuel to the fire with an Easter Sunday letter to the editor of his own newspaper, *Corriere della Sera* . Among other things, Allam charged that deeper than the current wave of fundamentalist-inspired terrorism, Islam itself contains "the root of evil" because it is "physiologically violent and historically prone to conflict."

All this was bound to produce blowback, and it wasn't long in coming.

Few questioned Allam's right to convert, but rather the public spotlight afforded by the pope. Aref ali Nayed, for example, director of the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Amman, Jordan, suggested that the affair "provokes genuine questions about the motives, intentions and plans of some of the pope's advisers on Islam." A piece on a Hamas-owned Web site by Palestinian journalist Khalid Amayreh objected to the "purposefully high profile the Vatican gave this conversion," adding that "the problem lies in the vindictive atmosphere, including anti-Islamic allusions and insinuations."

Critical notes were also heard from the Catholic world. Italian Catholic journalist Aldo Maria Valli published a letter that he said came from a priest "working on the frontier with Islam," charging that the Allam baptism "repeats the error of Regensburg" -- a reference to the global firestorm that followed Pope Benedict's Sept. 12, 2006, lecture at the University of Regensburg, quoting a 14th century Byzantine emperor to the effect that Muhammad brought things "only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

Stung by such protest, the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, published a commentary on Tuesday by

editor Gian Maria Vian insisting that there had been no "hostile intent," and stressing the importance of religious freedom. Vian also asserted that Benedict XVI is committed to dialogue with Islam. The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, said Thursday on Vatican Radio that "to welcome into the church a new believer obviously does not signify marrying all his ideas and views, particularly on political or social subjects."

Be that as it may, it's tough to believe anyone at the Vatican was actually surprised by the reaction. For one thing, Allam sometimes comes off as deliberately incendiary; he recently expressed the hope, for example, that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will be captured by the Israelis and forced to live at Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. For another, the Vatican is obviously aware, post-Regensburg, of keen sensitivity in the Islamic world to perceived papal slights.

Given those realities, why did Benedict do it? At least three points come to mind:

- For a pope committed to reawakening a strong missionary spirit in Catholicism, receiving a high-profile convert during the Easter Vigil is a symbolic way of making the point. In effect, Benedict is saying that the church shouldn't shrink from receiving anyone who knocks on its door, even if there's a political price to be paid.
- Allam's baptism can also be read as a statement of solidarity with Muslim converts to Christianity around the world, many of whom suffer in various ways on account of that decision.
- Finally, the episode illustrates an important wrinkle to Benedict's personality -- stubborn indifference to the canons of political correctness. Benedict is a gracious figure, but he also refuses to sanitize what he regards as important matters of belief or practice in order to avoid PR headaches. Whether that amounts to moral courage or tone-deafness to public reaction is a matter of opinion, but the pattern is clear.

Allam himself confirmed the first two interpretations in his letter to *Corriere della Sera*, describing Benedict's act as a "courageous and historical gesture" as well as an "explicit and revolutionary message" that Christians "should not be afraid to affirm the truth of Jesus, even among Muslims." He also said that Benedict never hesitated to baptize him, "from the first instant in which he learned of my desire."

All this notwithstanding, Vian's argument in *L'Osservatore Romano* is convincing on at least one point: Benedict XVI does genuinely seem to want dialogue with Islam, in a way that distinguishes his position from true anti-Islamic hawks (including, perhaps, Allam himself, at least at his most acerbic). Benedict went out of his way to meet with Islamic leaders in Cologne, Germany, during his first foreign trip; he conducted a successful fence-mending exercise with Muslims during his November 2006 trip to Turkey, including a moment of silent prayer in Istanbul's Blue Mosque; Benedict will sit down again with Muslims, along with leaders of other religions, during his April visit to the United States; and plans were recently finalized for a November meeting between the pope and signatories to a letter from 138 Muslim leaders proposing theological common ground between Christianity and Islam.

In other words, at precisely the same time that Benedict is challenging Muslims on religious freedom and the relationship between faith and reason, he's also determined to build relationships.

How does the pope reconcile those two impulses? Simple: In Benedict's worldview, the deepest threat today is not Islam, it's the "dictatorship of relativism," meaning secularism and moral and philosophical relativism in the West. In that struggle, Benedict believes a reformed, moderate Islam ought to be Christianity's natural ally. His efforts to stimulate such a reform, and his outstretched hand in dialogue, are, by that logic, perfectly consistent.

To date, the evidence is mixed as to whether Muslims actually experience what the pope is saying and doing in quite that spirit. Benedict's inter-religious session in the States, as well as his November encounter with Islamic leaders in Rome, afford him new opportunities to make the case.

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On Thursday, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops offered a press briefing regarding Benedict's interreligious and ecumenical meetings during his April 15-20 visit. The pope will meet roughly 200 leaders of other faiths at the John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C., on April 17, and will lead an ecumenical vespers service at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in New York on April 18 for a group of almost 300 people, representing virtually every major Christian denomination in the country.

Fr. Ronald Roberson and Fr. Dennis McManus led Thursday's briefing. Roberson handles ecumenical affairs for the bishops, while McManus is a consultant on Catholic/Jewish relations and has been involved in the planning for the interreligious session.

I asked McManus if he was aware of any fallout among American Muslims from the Allam baptism, to which his basic response was "very little."

"I was with a group of Muslims last night at Georgetown, and the topic came up," McManus said. "For them, it was a question of what the baptism of a very public figure like Allam means. I think the answer of the Holy See, and of anyone who looks at it, is that this was a decision of his own heart, of someone who sincerely in conscience seeks to find God. We all must respect the individual spiritual journey of a person who truly and honestly finds God in a particular religious tradition."

Beyond that, McManus said, the Allam baptism should not become "the lens through which we judge Vatican/Islamic relations worldwide."

In that regard, McManus cited a statement from influential Muslim leader Aref ali Nayed in Jordan, which I quoted above. Beyond questioning the public nature of the baptism, McManus pointed out, Nayed also argued that it should not be a "distraction" from progress made just this month in Rome, including plans for Benedict's November encounter with Muslim leaders and the foundation of a new "Catholic/Muslim Forum."

McManus said these recent breakthroughs are "historical by every standard" and "breathtaking."

I also asked McManus to comment on concerns about a Good Friday prayer for the conversion of the Jews in the pre-Vatican II Latin liturgy. Shortly before Holy Week, Benedict XVI issued a revised version of the prayer in response to Jewish criticism, but because the pope's prayer still refers to "conversion," concern in some quarters has not abated.

McManus said that Jewish leaders have been working with Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican's top official for Jewish/Catholic relations, to request a letter from Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State and thus the number two official in the church, clarifying the intent and meaning of the prayer.

"The language [of the prayer] does not suggest any program whatsoever of proselytism or forced baptism or compulsion on any Jew, or the Jewish community worldwide, by the Catholic church," McManus said. He suggested that the thrust of the prayer is eschatological, meaning that it refers to the end-times: "It is praying for the conversion of all the family of nations, Jews included, to Christ in his headship at the end of the world, when he will present all mankind to God the Father," McManus said.

McManus said that Jewish ferment about the prayer arises, at least in part, from historical experience.

"This has been a concern for the Jewish community for the last 800 or 900 years, reflecting times when baptism was forced upon Jews, or when punishment was inflicted if they didn't convert. The concern is that the violations of their consciences and their human rights during the early and high Middle Ages not be repeated or invoked."

McManus said Catholic/Jewish conversations designed to produce a letter from Bertone are "substantial and very good."

Roberson was asked about Protestant reaction to a Vatican document last July asserting that Catholicism alone contains the fullness of what it means to be a "church." When it was released, some Protestants criticized the text as a return to Catholic "triumphalism" and predicted it would have negative ecumenical implications.

In essence, Roberson's answer was that the text has been misunderstood. As Catholics have tried to "get the story out there," he said, some of the alarm has dissipated. In fact, Roberson suggested, the document was not anti-ecumenical, but instead it rejected an anti-ecumenical reading of a key document from Vatican II.

Roberson didn't develop the point, and I don't have space to unpack what he meant in detail. In a nutshell, however, his reference was to a thesis written at Rome's Gregorian University in 2002 by a German student named Alexandra von Teuffenbach, based on the diaries of famed Jesuit theologian Fr. Sebastian Tromp. An influential advisor to Pope Pius XII and still a force at Vatican II, Tromp believed that when the council taught that the church of Christ "subsists in" the Catholic church, it meant that the church of Christ simply "is" the Catholic church. Teuffenbach's work was later taken up by Jesuit Fr. Karl Becker, an advisor to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to downplay Pope John Paul II's statement in the 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* that the church of Christ is also present in Christian bodies outside the Catholic church.

The Vatican document from last July clearly was meant to reject the idea that all Christian bodies are simply equal, but it also distances itself from the Teuffenbach-Becker line. Readers wishing more background can find it in an article by American Jesuit theologian Fr. Jared Wicks at http://www.geii.org/ecumenical_trends_july_august_2007.pdf.

Among other things, the episode offers a reminder of a key point: It's sometimes difficult for non-Catholics (or, for that matter, for some Catholic liberals) to imagine that there are views in the church to the right of those expressed in official Vatican documents, but surprisingly often a document that seems tough actually contains a veiled critique of even more hard-line views.

One final point worth making for those unfamiliar with the dynamics of papal trips is that encounters with leaders of other religions, or other Christians, are basically ceremonial events rather than an occasion for substantive exchange. The pope gives a speech, but there's no formal response from anyone, and there's little opportunity for anybody to react aside from a few seconds when they're presented to the pope for a handshake and a picture. To the extent there's any dialogue, therefore, it will be largely after the fact.

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I was at St. Mary's College in South Bend, Indiana, this week, to give a lecture on the impact of 1968 upon the life and thought of Pope Benedict XVI. The event was part of a three-lecture series at St. Mary's exploring the influence of three key events from 1968: the riots and political upheaval that gripped Europe and the United States; *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical on birth control; and the death of Thomas Merton, the famed Trappist monk and spiritual writer.

Much of what I had to say will be familiar to anyone who has read the pope's own reflections on 1968. In a nutshell, my argument was that the tumult of that year, especially the emergence of a Marxist-tinged Christianity, consolidated reservations that then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger had voiced as early as the closing session of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) about an overly horizontal, and excessively optimistic, reading of the relationship between Christianity and modernity.

In the middle of working on the lecture, I was pulled away to write a piece about the 30th anniversary of the kidnapping and murder of former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro in1978. That coincidence got me thinking about the importance of 1978 for recent Catholic history -- and unless somebody has already had the idea, I'd like to propose that an enterprising college, university, seminary, or other institution pull together a program in 2008 to ponder several crucial turning points from 30 years ago.

Aside from the obvious fact that 1978 was the "Year of the Three Popes," with the death of Paul VI, the election and then death of John Paul I, and finally the election of John Paul II -- events of mammoth importance for shaping the subsequent course of Catholic affairs -- consider these other examples:

- The Moro affair, which broke the heart of Paul VI, cost the life of a great European Catholic statesman,

and discredited the idea of an "opening to the left" both in the church and in Western politics;

- The legalization of abortion in traditionally ultra-Catholic Italy, now seen as a dividing line in cultural history separating the era of Christianity from that of secularism as the dominant social force in Europe;
- The birth of the world's first "test-tube baby," Louise Brown, marking the public debut of the biotechnology revolution and its dizzying new ethical challenges;
- The Iranian Revolution, which emboldened an entire generation of Muslim radicals, revolutionaries, and activists. Among other things, this rising tide of Islamic energy poses obvious challenges to Catholicism, and the Allam affair is a reminder that the church still seems to be groping towards a fully articulated response.

Taken together, if those points aren't the basis for a fascinating symposium or panel discussion someplace, I don't know what is. Put me on the guest list!

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is **jallen@ncronline.org[1]**

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