NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Vatican ambassador to U.S. talks of coming papal trip

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 4, 2008 All Things Catholic

Editor's Note: *Just as today's column was being posted, John Allen filed the following report on his daily news journal:* Vatican fence-mending campaign with Jews picks up steam [1].

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I was in Washington, D.C., this week for a Tuesday luncheon sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. George Weigel and I had been invited by Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum, to brief reporters on Pope Benedict XVI's April 15-20 visit to the United States. As Weigel put it, he was there to offer an "op/ed" perspective, with emphasis on the pope and Islam, while I tried to fill the "news hole" with a broad overview.

A transcript of that session can be found on the Pew Forum Web site at www.pewforum.org [2].

Later Tuesday afternoon, I ventured a couple miles down Massachusetts Avenue to visit the Apostolic Nunciature, the embassy of the Holy See to the United States, for an interview with the pope's top man in America: Italian archbishop and veteran papal diplomat Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the papal nuncio (ambassador).

Benedict XVI will be staying at the nunciature in Washington, though Sambi demurred when I asked him to show me the pope's room; apparently the U.S. Secret Service has imposed a gag order on that bit of information. Sambi was happy, however, to show off a few bits of spit-and-polish around the house. For example, a new bank of trees has been installed on the grounds to shield its garden from the busy street outside, in case the pope wants to take a private walk around its small oval path.

Sambi also showed me the nunciature's chapel, where Benedict will say Mass on the morning of April 16 before heading to the White House for a closed-door session with President George W. Bush. April 16 happens to be Benedict's 81st birthday, and as Sambi put it, the small nunciature staff "will be his family that day."

(Liturgy wonks may be interested to learn that, according to Sambi, the design of the chapel means the pope will celebrate his birthday Mass *versus populum*, facing the small congregation, rather than *ad orientem*, facing East.)

In terms of news flashes, one intriguing bit from the Sambi interview is that he left the door slightly open for a private encounter between the pope and victims of sexual abuse while he's in America, saying only that it's "within the field of possibility." He also asserted that speculation about Benedict reading the riot act to Catholic

educators during an April 18 session at the Catholic University of America amounts to "instrumentalization" of the pope by American Catholics with theological or political axes to grind.

"The problem is that there are too many people here who would like to be the pope," Sambi sighed, "and who attribute to themselves a strong sense of their own infallibility."

Sambi's trademark sense of humor flashed at other points, such as when I asked if he has personally briefed the boss in preparation for the visit. Smiling, Sambi replied: "I'm not paid to sit here and do nothing!"

Taken as whole, the interview offers insight into how Sambi sizes up both broader American culture and the state of the church in this country. Since one of the core duties of a nuncio is to make recommendations about new bishops, Sambi is an important player indeed in shaping the future of Catholicism in America.

Sambi, 69, was appointed nuncio to the U.S. in December 2005, after serving seven years as apostolic delegate to Jerusalem and Palestine and nuncio to Israel. In his diplomatic career, he has also served as the Vatican ambassador in Cyprus, Indonesia and Burundi.

***NCR*: In a few words, what is the significance of this visit?**

Archbishop Sambi: The purpose is to go back to the roots of the church in the United States. We celebrate this year the 200th anniversary of the foundation of four very important dioceses: New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and what is now Louisville. We also mark the anniversary of the promotion of Baltimore as the first metropolitan archdiocese in the United States. To return to your roots means to go back to the sources of your identity, and by doing so, to find a path to the future.

There is another fundamental reason for the trip, which is found in the Gospel. One of the main duties of the Successor of Peter is to confirm his brothers and sisters in the faith.

A third important element is that the United States is a superpower, with a great influence on almost everything in the world. To be a real superpower, however, brute strength is not enough. Of course, great military, economic and political strength is very important. But you must also have solid and consistent values -- human, moral and spiritual values.

America has had many of these values, such as freedom, democracy, respect for human beings and fundamental human rights. Today, the United States exports many things around the world. What it could export more, however, are the great values that a superpower should have.

You deliberately said the United States "had" these values. Are you suggesting that the country doesn't have them now?

I don't say that the United States doesn't have them anymore. Americans insist on these values even today. But you know, it's been almost 40 years now that I've been moving around the world. I've noticed everywhere I go

that the youth of the world sing American songs, they dance American dances, they eat American food. They use American English as the language of the computer. They cultivate an American mentality.

If you look carefully at all this, you see that what America is exporting throughout the world, especially to the youth of this world, is not always the most noble and constructive qualities America has to offer.

It's election season in America. Are you worried that the pope's trip might be manipulated for political purposes?

I have said this already in many different ways: The pope is not coming to get mixed up in the internal local political process. The program has been put together very carefully so that the visit of the pope is that of a religious leader, of a friend of humanity and a friend of the United States, who will speak in a spirit of friendship to the citizens of this country, not for the immediate interests of the electoral process. His presence is about something more universal, and at the same time more personal.

Do you see it as your job to help ensure that the visit is not distorted by the lens of partisan politics?

Yes. The visit should be seen and interpreted in the spirit with which the pope himself comes to the United States, and not be instrumentalized. It's always a sign of weakness to instrumentalize someone else. It means that you don't have a clear purpose or vision, and so you have to manipulate others for your own interests.

Has anyone helped the pope prepare for the visit?

In the book *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* [published in English by Basic Books in 2006], the pope has a very long chapter on the situation in the United States, both of the church and the society. Anyone reading it will see that the Holy Father knows very well what the reality is.

Have you personally shared some thoughts with the Holy Father about the trip?

I'm not paid to sit here and do nothing!

In broad terms, what do you expect the pope's message will be?

There have been many failed prophets who have tried to anticipate what the pope will say here and there. I can tell you only that what the pope will say, the pope himself knows, and nobody else.

You have not seen the texts of his speeches?

No. And if I have not seen them, others have surely not seen them!

I've detected an increasingly positive view of the United States in the Vatican. The perception seems to be that as an aggressive form of secularism continues to spread in Europe, the United States, for all of its problems, remains an intensely religious society. Am I reading that correctly?

Well, you're reading me correctly. I've been deeply impressed by the religiosity of the American people. You have a higher share of people going to Mass here, for example, than in any country of Europe. I have been impressed that, amid a deep crisis of the family in the broader culture, there are so many solid Christian families. I have also been impressed by the generosity of the American people. As I said before, I've travelled the world in the service of the Holy See for almost 40 years, and I've seen everywhere the signs of American generosity. It started, actually, when I was a small child [in post-war Italy], and we received these packages with something incredible inside ? chocolate! There was an inscription saying, "A gift of the American people."

I always say, however, that the duty of a nuncio is two-fold: to encourage what's good, and to tell people, "You can do much more."

How would you analyze the situation facing the Catholic church in the United States?

When you are a minority, as Catholics are in this culture, you need three strong principles. The first is a clear identity, a clear sense of what you are and what you want to be. As a minority, if you lack a clear identity, you're like a drop of wine in a glass of water ? you'll disappear. The second thing is a strong sense of belonging. I would express it in this way: you need a community, and the community needs you. Whoever walks alone sooner or later will be lost in the desert. Third, when you are a minority, you need a deep commitment to excellence. You must excel in human qualities, in family qualities, in professional qualities, in the qualities of Christian life, in order to be a light for others. If you don't have a sense of excellence, you will be submerged by the majority.

When you have these three qualities -- a clear identity, a sense of belonging, and a sense of excellence -- then you're ready to collaborate with everybody, ready to engage yourself for a better humanity and a better future.

Let's talk about the meeting with Catholic educators, including the presidents of Catholic colleges and universities. There's been some speculation that the pope is going to read educators the riot act on matters of Catholic identity.

Even in the Catholic church, nobody has the right to instrumentalize the visit of the pope to serve their personal interests!

You feel there's been some of that?

Yes, there has been. Look, for a great part of his life, the pope was an educator. Actually, as pope he's still an educator. It's simply normal, therefore, that the pope would address the educators of the United States. He will touch the problem of Catholic identity, of course, but this is absolutely normal. If you don't have a clear sense of identity in education, you don't produce happy people, you produce disoriented people. One of the main purposes of education is to show young people how to face life, how to find joy in life, not just momentary satisfaction that creates a sense of emptiness. These are deep truths that shouldn't be abused in internal church arguments.

You feel that speculation about the pope reprimanding educators has been stoked by people with axes to grind?

The problem is that there are too many people here who would like to be the pope ?and who attribute to themselves a strong sense of their own infallibility!

The sex abuse crisis has been a deep trauma for the Catholic church in America. What do you expect from the Holy Father on that subject?

I expect him to say that we have to move forward from this situation, which has so humiliated the church in the United States. To move forward, we have to go back to the basic ministry of the church, which is to be representatives of Jesus Christ. Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" When the disciples said "Yes," his reply was: "Feed my sheep, take care of my lambs." Our attitude towards the faithful must be one of service -- love of God and service to our brothers and sisters. We must have the same respect for the faithful that Jesus had, who sacrificed his life for each of them.

Will the pope express sorrow or regret?

I don't know what he will express. But when he's talked about this subject before, also in talks with bishops from other parts of the world, he has put a strong emphasis on the need to go out from such situations, to move forward.

Why is he not going to Boston?

Look, he's 80 years old. While he's here, he'll celebrate his 81st birthday. You ask why he's not going to Boston, but you could also ask why he's not going to San Francisco or some other place. He just can't go everywhere. He will speak to Boston, and to San Francisco ? from New York and Washington. He will speak to all the people of the United States, including all the Catholics of the United States.

Boston was the epicenter of the crisis. Some might argue that he's avoiding the sex abuse crisis by not going there.

No, he's not avoiding it. I can assure you that he's not avoiding it. Be patient, and you will see that he's not avoiding the problem. He's not the kind of man who hides from difficulties. He's too sincere, both before God and before his brothers and sisters.

Why isn't the pope meeting with victims?

How do you know that he won't?

It's not part of the official program.

Yes, that's right. It's not part of the official program.

Do you think there might be a moment for such a meeting unofficially?

It's not important what I think. It's important what will happen.

So it's possible?

It's within the field of possibility, but I cannot confirm anything.

So let me rephrase: Why isn't a meeting with victims part of the official program?

Because the feeling was that at this moment, it would not be the best way to heal their wounds. Our primary goal with the victims is to help them heal from this very deep hurt that has been imposed on them.

The concern was that a public event might simply re-open their wounds?

Exactly.

In considering America's role in the world, it's hard not to think about Iraq. The difference of opinion between the Vatican and the Bush administration over the wisdom of the war is well known. Do you expect the Holy Father to talk about Iraq?

The pope will have a private conversation with the president. Since it's private, not even I will be present. It's just the two of them. Of course, the position of the church is well known. War must be the last resort, because it's always a sign of human failure. The church will never be favorable to war. We all know how war can start, but you never know how it will end. You must try all other human means of solving problems. The situation should be solved, but war should be the last report.

Aside from the meeting with the president, will the pope address Iraq publicly?

I don't think this is the main point of the visit.

Some critics say that the American bishops weren't as forceful on the war as they might have been, in part because they were divided, in part because they were distracted by the sex abuse crisis. Do you think that's true?

No, the American bishops took a very clear position. They were not in favor of the war, but once it happened, they supported a "responsible transition" out of Iraq. We shouldn't leave the local population in an even worse situation.

That's the official position, but some say the bishops weren't effective in making the case.

They articulated that position very clearly. It's not the bishops who declared the war, and it's not the bishops who can conclude the war. They've done what it is the mission of the bishops to do.

The pope will be meeting with leaders of other faiths at a time of some turbulence in a couple of Catholicism's relationships with other religious. Some Jews have protested the Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews in the old Latin liturgy, while some Muslims have criticized Benedict's decision to baptize a convert from Islam and fierce critic of Islamic fundamentalism during the Easter Vigil Mass.

Are you worried that this turbulence will cast a shadow over the visit?

As it happens, I just returned from a trip to Springfield-Cape Girardeau, [Missouri]. I travel quite a bit, and I've learned that turbulence is part of the travel experience. If you want to avoid turbulence, you have to stay at home. Turbulence, in other words, is part of what it means to move forward towards greater understanding and collaboration, both in the ecumenical and inter-religious field. We should not be shocked by turbulence. ? I think both [meetings] will be positive and encouraging.

Some people have asked if there will be 'another Regensburg' on this trip, meaning another phrase in one of the pope's speeches which is open to misinterpretation. Will we see a more careful choice of words?

First of all, misinterpretation doesn't depend primarily upon the one who is speaking. It depends upon the good will, or the bad will, of those who are listening. I think the pope will do whatever he can to be clear, and not to be misunderstood. His first obedience, however, is to the truth.

At the end of the day, how will the Catholic church in the United States be different because of this trip?

I would say that the church in the United States should make more and more evident a spirit of service to the faithful in the name of Jesus Christ. My experience is that where you have a parish priest who is truly dedicated to the service of his parish, the sex scandals have not produced great damages. In dioceses where the bishop is a really good pastor, at the service of the Gospel and of the faithful, the sex scandal has not had a very bad impact. The way to move forward is through a deeper spirituality in serving God and serving others. This trip will be a strong push in that direction.

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