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Lessons to learn from the papal trip

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 9, 2008 All Things Catholic

On Wednesday I spoke at the annual World Communications Day luncheon of the Diocese of Brooklyn, hosted by Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio. For this group of media professionals in the New York area, as well as local Catholics, I was asked to ruminate on lessons to be learned from the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United States.

Here's more or less what I said.

Two national polls released in recent days lend empirical confirmation to impressions of a massive communications success. Surveys by the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion, and by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, converge in finding that the pope got roughly a ten-point bump in favorability ratings in the United States in the wake of his April 15-20 swing.

The Marist poll asked Americans to rate Benedict as a "spiritual leader" and a "world leader" before and after the trip, and on both measures his scores went up ten points -- 62 percent of Americans now describe him as "excellent" or "good" on the former, and 51 percent say the same about the latter. The Pew Forum found that Benedict's overall approval rating in the United States went up nine points, from 52 percent to 61, and among Catholics it went from 74 to 83 percent.

As I noted in Brooklyn, getting 83 percent of American Catholics to agree on virtually anything is a minor miracle, let alone what they think of the job the pope is doing.

Perhaps most tellingly, the Marist survey found that 52 percent of Americans said the trip gave them a "more positive" impression of the Catholic church, while only 12 percent said "less positive." Cumulatively, the data lead to one inexorable conclusion: from a communications point of view, the trip was a home run for the Holy Father.

Of course, being pope is not a popularity contest, and Benedict didn't come to America to boost his poll numbers. His fundamental task is to bear witness to the faith, which he did in spades. His capacity to draw rave reviews while doing so is, nevertheless, impressive.

That said, it's worth reflecting for a moment on how easily things might not have turned out this way. Recent

experience suggests that discussions of the Catholic church, and of religion generally, in the media and in the public square don't always have such a happy ending.

Indeed, the enterprise of church communications faces a daunting series of challenges. While the pope's trip was an exception to how these dynamics often play out, it didn't make them go away. If we don't learn the lessons of the trip, there's every reason to believe that soon we'll be back to business as usual.

Those challenges fall both on the side of the press and the side of the church -- and since I inhabit both worlds, I'll say a brief word about each.

With regard to the press, the problem is not bias against Catholicism or religion, although one can find isolated cases. The real problem is that religion is not taken seriously as a news beat, which means that it does not draw the same systematic, daily coverage as politics, finance, sports and even entertainment. The secular press covers big religious events, in addition to controversy or scandal, but often ignores the daily warp and woof of religious life.

Here's a quick way of making the point. Consider the following three questions:

- If there's a Democratic primary Tuesday night, would you expect a story in Wednesday's paper?
- If there's a college football game Saturday, would you expect a write-up in Sunday's sports section?
- Do you instinctively turn to Monday's paper for coverage of what happened in places of worship over the weekend?

The usual answers to those questions -- "yes," "yes," and "no" -- speak volumes what counts as news in the mainstream press. (This is a sweeping generalization to which there are many notable exceptions -- but precisely as a generalization, I think it holds up.)

As a result, coverage of religion is often episodic, random, and superficial. To be clear, it's not that the reporting is excessively negative. On the contrary, critical digs on religious subjects are just as infrequent, probably more so, than "good news" stories. In either case, we often get the individual story right, but miss the context in which that story ought to be located.

One classic example is coverage of the sexual abuse crisis during 2002, when it dominated national headlines. That focus was entirely appropriate -- it was a classic case of the press playing its traditional, and critically important, watchdog role. Yet there was no equivalent attention to the fact that in the same year:

- 2.7 million children were educated in Catholic schools in the United States, a disproportionate share of them in inner-city areas abandoned by other institutions;
- 10 million Americans were given assistance by Catholic Charities, many of them low-income women and children;
- Catholic hospitals provided $2.8 billion in uncompensated charitable care, once again much of it directed to low-income women and children.

Anyone wanting to tell the whole story of the Catholic church's track record with regard to the welfare of children would have had these points in the mix. The fact that it generally wasn't, in my experience, is not due to anti-Catholic bias, but rather because routine religious life often flies below the media radar.

On the side of the church, our communications capacity is often hobbled by at least three factors.

First, we sometimes speak an insider's Catholic argot that is difficult for the outside world to understand. As Benedict XVI has repeatedly observed, the church is a culture unto itself, with its own language, history, and psychology. All of that may be second nature to those who move within the culture, but it has to be translated for people on the outside. In Brooklyn, I described a moment during CNN's coverage of the papal Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral when I caught myself using words such as "dicastery" and "ecclesiology," and realized that I had just left 99 percent of our audience behind.

Second, the church sometimes fails to make even a basic level of commitment to communications. In Rome, for example, the Vatican Press Office closes each day at 3:00 p.m. -- God help a reporter if a story breaks at 3:30 p.m.! Under John Paul II, the Vatican spent millions building a state-of-the-art center for press conferences, which is utilized maybe two or three times a month. The Vatican's daily news bulletin is simply plunked down on a counter in the Press Office -- the Vatican spokesperson does not come out of his office to take questions, to do some basic rumor control and to provide context for understanding the day's developments, which the spokesperson for any other major global institution would do as a matter of course. One can often find similar patterns at lower levels.

(By the way, this is not because spokespersons for the Vatican are lazy or incompetent. On the contrary, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, who held the job under John Paul II, and now Fr. Federico Lombardi, are talented professionals who understand the dynamics of the modern media, and are very decent men. The problem is structural and cultural, not personal.)

Third, spokespersons and leaders in the church still too often come off as defensive and closed. In a famous 1984 address, John Paul II said that the church should be a "house of glass," so that everyone can look in from the outside and see what's going on. That implies a level of transparency and readiness to respond to public curiosity that, alas, one doesn't always find in practice.

Perhaps the $64,000 question thus becomes: Why was the pope's trip able to make such a positive splash, in spite of these challenges?

In part, I would suggest, because it fell into the category of "big event" which the American press handles very well. CNN, to take the example I know best, broadcast three Masses during the trip more or less from start to finish -- Nationals Park, St. Patrick's Cathedral, and Yankees Stadium. Such saturation coverage obviously gave the pope an opportunity to cast himself and his message in a positive light. (For those interested in this aspect, here's the Pew Forum's analysis of media coverage of the trip: Papal coverage fills 16 percent of news hole [1])

The lion's share of the credit, however, has to go to the pope himself. My suspicion is that the average American took away two basic images of Benedict XVI: kindness and candor. They saw a spiritual leader who came off as

warm, humble, and compassionate, and who did not flinch from addressing the pain left behind by the sexual abuse crisis.

Perhaps the most telling bit of data from the Marist College poll was this: By a more than two-to-one margin, Americans identified Benedict XVI's April 17 meeting with five victims of sexual abuse as the "most meaningful" moment of the trip. The next most popular response was the April 20 visit to Ground Zero.

It's striking that these events had the smallest crowds, and neither featured a papal speech. The meeting with victims wasn't even broadcast. Yet these two moments left the deepest impression, because on both occasions the pope was reaching out to suffering people -- victims of sexual abuse in Washington, and first responders, survivors, and family members of the victims at Ground Zero.

The lesson to be learned is that spiritual leaders don't need elaborate choreography, adoring multitudes, or high-octane rhetoric in order to stir hearts. All they have to do is show the world a pastoral face, and the rest will usually follow.

I concluded my remarks in Brooklyn with two challenges -- one to my colleagues in the press, the other to those responsible for communications in the church.

For the press, my challenge is to transform religion into a serious news beat, so that coverage becomes on-going and routine -- in other words, so that we get both the text and the context right.

I recognize that this is easier said than done. For one thing, media outlets often find that religion coverage doesn't carry its own weight financially -- it's harder to sell ads for the religion pages than the sports section. For another, taking a critical look at religion requires courage, because it's a subject that stirs deep passions. It's easy for reporters to be accused of anti-Catholicism or anti-Semitism, just to take two examples, simply for doing their jobs. It's also true that churches can be a closed shop, more difficult to penetrate than political or corporate bodies that see themselves as accountable to voters or shareholders.

All of that, however, explains why coverage of religion is difficult, not why it's unimportant.

For the church, my challenge is even simpler: Do not forget the lessons of Benedict's visit.

At the end of the day, it wasn't stagecraft or slick PR strategies that made the trip a success. It was the gut-level impression of kindness and candor that radiated from the pope. If Catholicism hopes to gain a sympathetic hearing, its capacity to project those two qualities loom as the essential prerequisite.

Here's the thing, however: It's not enough merely to *project* kindness and candor. We actually have to *be* kind and candid -- and that, as any spiritual guide will tell you, is never a "once and for all" deal. It requires daily resolve. Living up to that standard, personally and institutionally, represents perhaps the most lasting challenge left behind by Benedict XVI's six days in America.

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