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Louisville's Joseph Kurtz; Improving relations between the Vatican and America

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 26, 2008 All Things Catholic

I?m in Louisville, Kentucky, this week, as a keynote presenter at the biennial convocation of the Catholic Coalition on Preaching, a consortium of national organizations dedicated to excellence in preaching. My partner in crime is Dominican Sr. Barbara Reid, who teaches at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. (Personally, I get very nervous when journalists start preaching, so I was especially delighted that Reid was on hand to do the theological heavy lifting.)

While in town, I took the opportunity to sit down with Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, who took the reins in Louisville a year ago after serving eight years as bishop of Knoxville, Tennessee. He replaced popular Archbishop Thomas Kelly, a Dominican who led the Louisville archdiocese for a quarter-century.

Kurtz, 62, is widely seen as a rising star in the American hierarchy. While he was still in Knoxville, the diocese topped a February 2007 ranking of American dioceses by Crisis magazine based on numerical criteria such as active priests, vocations, and adults received into the church. After just a year in Louisville, he?s launched an aggressive stewardship campaign with a goal of raising $66 million to foster what Kurtz calls ?vibrant parishes.? Kurtz also plays an important role on the national stage. He was elected treasurer of the U.S. bishops? conference at the November 2007 meeting (defeating Bishop Michael Bransfield of Wheeling-Charleston by a 2-to-1 margin), and also serves as chair of a subcommittee currently preparing a new, and mildly controversial, pastoral letter on marriage.

The following are excerpts from the interview, which took place in Kurtz?s office at the chancery in Louisville. The full text can be found here: **Interview with Archbishop Kurtz** [1]

NCR: You grew up in Pennsylvania, but your episcopal career has been in Tennessee and Kentucky. What have you learned about Catholicism in the South?

Archbishop Kurtz: When I went to Knoxville the day my appointment as bishop was announced, it was the first time I had ever physically been in the state of Tennessee. I had a sense of, ?What kind of world is this?? ? What I found is that much of East Tennessee has some of the fabric, especially in the rural areas, that I knew coming from the coal regions of Pennsylvania ? small towns, very family driven.

Here in central Kentucky, there are really three worlds. In the southern tier, the part that borders Tennessee, you?re talking about very rural areas where Catholics are a clear minority. The farther you go down, you find large numbers of Freewill Baptists. It?s very congregational. It?s homey, not necessarily wanting to know what the rest of the world is thinking.

In the middle of the archdiocese is the Bardstown area, very small but extremely rooted in Catholicism. I was just down there yesterday to visit the Dominican mother house and St. Catherine?s College. When I went in the gate, it said, ?1822: The first Dominican community of sisters established in the United States.? That?s not at all atypical when you go down into what we call the ?Catholic holy land.?

Then you?ve got urban Louisville. We?re having some clustering, but 65 of our parishes, more than half of the whole archdiocese, are in this county. It has deep Catholic roots in terms of numbers of parishes and institutions ? schools, orphanages, hospitals and so on.

This year Louisville has 14 seminarians, up from four just two years ago. How much of a difference does a bishop make in generating vocations?

That?s a good question. How much of a difference does a coach make to a team? Devoting time to vocations, making it a priority, is important, and I try to be bold in saying that God really is calling. ? On the other hand, we have to be careful that we aren?t pulled in by the numbers game. Thirty years ago people depended upon priests to do many things that today are being done by lay people, women?s religious and deacons, which they?re doing very well, and very appropriately. ? Maybe in big archdioceses they have to think more in terms of numbers, how many are retiring and how many are being ordained, but I resist that. Statistics can be an obstacle as much as a help.

During your first year in Louisville you insisted upon a greater embrace of the liturgical rules, such as the use of kneelers. Why?

I see a call for us to clearly reaffirm the local church. The atmosphere in the South is very much congregational-driven. The difficult thing is to help people understand, and take pride in the fact, that they?re part of something bigger, that it?s not just their parish but the diocese too. ? I?m hoping that it?s not simply a question of installing kneelers, but continuing to deepen the experience of worship within our community, and to do so in a way in which we come closer each Sunday not only as a parish but as a local church.

One diagnosis among bishops these days is that the post-Vatican II years achieved great reforms, while now there?s a need to reconsolidate some traditional aspects of Catholic identity. Do you agree?

I do, and the Holy Father has put his stamp of approval, so to speak, on this way of seeing things. He?s asked us to look at the distinctive things about the Second Vatican Council, which we in no way want to lose, but without this sense that we?re at the edge of a cliff -- with some insisting ?we?re not going there,? and others happily jumping off to leave the past behind. An over-emphasis on discontinuity is the problem.

You serve as chair of the Subcommittee on Marriage and Family of the conference, which is working on a new pastoral letter on marriage. Where does that project stand?

Our committee is meeting in three weeks in Chicago to look over a draft. My hope is that it will be ready, if not for the June meeting of the bishops, surely by November. Some say that November is actually a better time for fuller participation in something important, so there might be good reason, even if we were ready, to wait.

The draft has drawn mixed reactions. There seems a tension between using universally human language, drawing on social sciences, and more specifically Catholic language rooted in sacramental theology. How do you strike the right balance?

You?re right, there?s a tension, which the committee itself feels. Should we offer simply the theological presentation in the main text, and perhaps treat subjects such as growth in marriage, or public policy questions,

as separate items? I think that?s the direction we?ll end up with. ? Not everything has to be in one text, and in today?s age, it may well be desirable not to have everything in one text.

This is an election year, and once again bishops face questions about how to deal with Catholic politicians whose positions are at odds with church teaching. If Joe Biden, for example, campaigns in Louisville one Sunday and goes to Mass, will he get Communion?

I don?t know. I haven?t prepared either way, because he?s not a parishioner here. I have not given specific instructions with regard to Communion [for politicians]. ? My primary approach has been that if there is a politician who is Catholic within the archdiocese, and whose positions are counter to church teachings, the proper moment to deal with that is in personal conversation, giving that politician the opportunity to help shape his or her conscience.

What do you make of the recent flap over comments from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Biden over Catholic teaching on when life begins?

I?m not at all unhappy when a baptized person takes seriously his or her responsibility to learn about the faith and to communicate it to others. When anyone does that inaccurately, however, the bishop has a special responsibility as the chief teacher to point it out. ? It?s not the question of who has the mantle to speak for the church that I?m most concerned about, but doing it accurately.

The bishops have placed a discussion of abortion and politics on the agenda for the November meeting. What do you expect?

Sharing best practices. I always like to hear from other bishops, in a very free way, about the situations that have confronted them pastorally. The primary thrust needs to be, even in canon law, not something that?s punitive but something that really is remedial, that reaches out and helps people to form their conscience.

You don?t see the need for new policies?

I don?t. I?ll be listening for very solid pastoral approaches.

Finally, you?re preaching to the Catholic Coalition on Preaching this week, which has to be a bit daunting. Any tips on good preaching?

[Jesuit Fr.] Walter Burghardt said that the gift of dynamic, zealous preaching is rarely given to the lazy. Preparation, becoming a student of the word, is essential. On the other hand, I also got some great advice when I entered the seminary, which was, ?Never let a retreat director ruin a perfectly good retreat.? There?s something in that tension that?s good for a preacher to know. Yes, we should prepare, but we shouldn?t take ourselves so seriously that we?re not aware the Word of God itself is effective. ? Don?t think that the only variable is your words, and don?t make yourself more important than you really are.

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On Monday in Rome, I spoke to 35 members of the staff and the Board of Trustees of Catholic Healthcare Partners, a system composed of hospitals and long term care facilities in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee and Pennsylvania. The board decided to hold its annual retreat this year in Rome, meeting with Vatican officials and getting an education about the Eternal City.

The group was led by Sr. Doris Gottemoeller, former president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and currently senior vice president of mission for Catholic Healthcare Partners. On Monday, they had meetings in

the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Health Care Workers, in addition to a session in the afternoon based on my book *All the Pope?s Men*.

Though Gottemoeller and the other organizers wouldn?t put it like this, I would submit that the event was part of an on-going ?quiet revolution? in the relationship between Rome and the American Catholic church. Increasingly, Vatican officials and American Catholics these days are actually talking to each other -- and not just through the media or in cranky written correspondence, but face-to-face.

In the last few years, I?ve been asked to speak to several delegations in Rome organized by the Catholic Health Association, the main leadership body for Catholic health care systems in the United States. I?ve also taken part in sessions in Rome for leaders of Catholic higher education, put together by the Association for Catholic Colleges and Universities in tandem with the Rome-based Lay Centre, and for lay ministers. Groups representing other constituencies -- priests, lay movements, charitable enterprises, and so on -- have sponsored similar outings. In a sense, these meetings are analogous to the biannual visits that officers of the U.S. bishops? conference have been making to the Roman Curia since the mid-1980s, designed not to put out specific fires (though that sometimes happens) but rather to promote a steady two-way flow of information.

As a result, a sizeable cross-section of leaders, activists and opinion-makers from the American church now has direct contact with Vatican officials, and vice-versa. For a variety of reasons, this is an enormously positive development.

America is a long way away from Rome, and it?s easy for misunderstandings to fester. Some American Catholics have long grumbled that Roman perceptions are disproportionately shaped by a handful of malcontents who take the time to flood Vatican offices with gripes, such as purported liturgical abuses. Encounters with people who represent the Catholic mainstream help ensure that the squeaky wheels don?t get all the grease.

In some cases, the Vatican officials with whom these delegations meet are themselves Americans, who are often called upon to explain stateside dynamics to their non-American colleagues. Hearing different voices from the American church provides these officials with resources, and confidence, to play that role effectively.

Given how obvious these points seem, it?s a fair question why such encounters haven?t been happening all along. Costs, logistical difficulty, and the fact that knocking on Vatican doors doesn?t come naturally to many people are all part of the picture, but organizers also tell me that something has changed on the Vatican side. One veteran of Catholic health care told me recently that he had tried to put something like this together ten years ago, but ran into a brick wall. Today, the atmosphere is more welcoming.

Of course, organizing an expedition to Rome can still be daunting. Bean counters may balk, even though an investment in building relationships is almost always money well spent. There are also, of course, physical limits to how many meetings Vatican officials can actually take. Moreover, this is a project for the marathon runner, not the sprinter. One-off encounters in the Holy See rarely generate quick fixes; Rome is all about the long haul.

Is it worth it? Here?s one indication: When Catholic hospitals first began making the transition to lay leadership several decades ago, often employing the canonical device of a ?public juridical person? rather than a religious order, they ran into resistance in Rome. Today, health care leaders say the atmosphere is much calmer. It?s probably not an accident that over the same arc of time, senior Vatican officials have come to know many of the lay leaders who are today taking charge. Since ?personnel is policy,? policy changes are usually easier to swallow when you know and trust the personnel.

Deeper than such strategic payoffs, of course, is the theological point that the church is supposed to be a global family of faith -- a communion -- and it?s simply not ?Catholic? to approach relationships through stereotypes based on class membership, such as what all ?bishops? are like, or ?nuns,? or ?Vatican officials.? The only way to avoid such dead-ends is to get to know people as individuals.

Conversation, in short, is always good. By itself, dialogue won?t magically make the church?s problems disappear, and it won?t automatically dissolve real disagreements. It can, however, make those challenges easier to face together, and that?s indisputably a step in the right direction.

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