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# The context of Cardinal Stafford's stark language

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 20, 2008 All Things Catholic

**A**ve been speaking and writing lately about U.S.-Vatican ties under Obama; I was at Colgate University earlier this week, for example, addressing students and faculty on this very subject. As fate would have it, my appearance coincided with a sharp reminder of the potential pitfalls in that relationship, in the form of some remarkably incendiary language from Cardinal Francis Stafford, an American who heads a Vatican court.

It?s not every day that a senior Vatican official uses loaded words such as "apocalyptic" to describe a new head of state, or says that Catholics cried "hot, angry tears of betrayal" after the election -- especially referring to a president who swept to victory with a solid majority of Catholic votes.

Inevitably, the story has been headlined "Vatican blasts Obama." Both elements of that formula are actually misleading: Stafford was not speaking for the Vatican, and he did not issue a blanket indictment of Obama. That said, Stafford?s comments nevertheless suggest just how challenging it may be to carve out a modus vivendi between the Catholic church and the new regime in Washington.

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Stafford was in Washington on Thursday, Nov. 13, for a lecture at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family. It was part of a conference dedicated to *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI?s 1968 encyclical affirming the church?s traditional ban on birth control.

Stafford commented at some length on Obama?s victory. Here?s what he said in the key portion of the address -- which, in vintage 21st century fashion, was posted on YouTube by *The Tower*, the student newspaper at Catholic University:

> *"Our exploration this weekend takes place in the context of Nov. 4, 2008. On that date, a cultural earthquake hit America. Senator Barak Obama was elected President of the United States. He appears to be a relaxed, smiling man. His rhetorical skills, as I mentioned, are very highly developed. He has a way of teasing crowds, and, from all reports, even individuals one-to-one. Under all of that grace and charm, there is a tautness of will, a clenched jaw, a state of constant alertness to attack and resist any external influence that might threaten his independence. A ?state of alertness,? yes ? that?s putting it mildly. Beneath each word he speaks, he carries on sapping operations against the enemy city. His clenched jaw was seen at his talk before the Planned Parenthood supporters July 17, 2007. There he asserted, and I?m quoting somewhat out of context but not out of his meaning: ?We are not only going to win this election, but also we are going to transform this nation. ? The first thing I?d do as president is to sign the Freedom of Choice Act. ? I put Roe at the center of my lesson plan on reproductive freedom when I taught constitutional law. ? I don?t want my daughters punished by a pregnancy. ? On this issue, I will not yield.? Note the way the president-elect wished to describe the killing of his unborn grandchild. His daughters must not be ?punished,? ?punished,? by pregnancy. His rhetoric is post-modernist, and marks an agenda*

*and vision that are aggressive, disruptive and apocalyptic. Catholics weep over these words. We weep over the violence concealed behind the rhetoric of our young president-to-be. What should we do with our hot, angry tears of betrayal? First, our tears are agonistic. We must acknowledge that. For the next few years, Gethsemane will not be marginal. We will know that garden."*

Here is the **full text of Cardinal Stafford's Nov. 13 remarks** [1].

(As a footnote, Stafford made a small factual error. Obama did not say he wouldn?t want his daughters "punished by a pregnancy" during his speech to the Planned Parenthood Action Fund on July 17, 2007. That comment instead came during a town hall meeting in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in March 2008, when Obama, speaking off the cuff in response to a question, said: "Look, I?ve got two daughters ? 9 years old and 6 years old. I am going to teach them first about values and morals, but if they make a mistake, I don?t want them punished with a baby. I don?t want them punished with an STD at age 16, so it doesn?t make sense to not give them information." Stafford corrected the reference in the written version of his remarks.)

(One other quick aside: In medieval warfare, a "sapping operation" referred to digging under a city wall in order to weaken the fortifications.)

Whenever a public figure says something explosive, context is usually the first casualty of reporting. Here, therefore, are four bits of context for understanding what Stafford said -- and hence what he meant.

- First, Stafford did not call Obama himself "aggressive, disruptive and apocalyptic," as was widely suggested by media reports, but rather Obama?s rhetoric in one specific setting -- the 2007 speech to Planned Parenthood. Whatever one makes of that, it does not amount to an anathema tout court.
- Second, in that specific context, the terms "aggressive" and "disruptive" seem less jarring. Even the most fervent advocates of the Freedom of Choice Act would concur that it is aggressive, intended to overturn all existing restrictions on abortion at the state and federal levels in one fell swoop, and that it is disruptive, in the sense that it elicits strong opposition. Further, it?s worth noting that the phrase ?aggressive, disruptive and apocalyptic? was not something Stafford invented, but rather a quotation from Francois Mauriac?s description of Andre Gide.
- Third, Stafford himself has provided clarification of what he meant by the term "apocalyptic." Contacted by CNN this week, Stafford said he didn?t intend a literal reference to the end of the world, but rather that Obama?s position on abortion is contrary to "natural and divine" laws regarding human life.
- Fourth, in the same conversation with CNN, Stafford also stressed that he was not speaking for the Vatican. There?s a natural tendency to assume that every time a Vatican official clears his throat, it?s at the order of the pope. In reality, officials give speeches and interviews all the time voicing opinions that don?t reflect the corporate line, and which haven?t been cleared or coordinated with anybody. Here?s the key point: the way the Vatican distances itself from such commentary is by not repeating it, and that?s precisely what?s happened in this case.

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I?ll add two other observations about Stafford?s background and personality, which may help flesh out the context for his Nov. 13 remarks.

First, whatever else Stafford was doing, he was not playing partisan politics. He was speaking instead out of a set of theological convictions premised on what he sees as a deep gulf between contemporary American culture and the values of the Gospel. Over the years, Stafford has used fairly stark language -- some might call it "prophetic speech" -- to express this conviction in ways that have challenged both left and right, and which makes his statement on Obama seem less sui generis.

Stafford?s view is informed by a theological current associated with the Swiss thinker Hans Urs von Balthasar, the Communio school founded after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), and its American interpreters such as David Schindler. Unlike neo-conservatives such as George Weigel and Michael Novak, who see basic compatibility between Catholic social thought and American-style capitalism and democracy, Communio thinkers tend to find deep differences -- and often feel frustrated that too many Americans, in their view, have been more evangelized by the culture than by their Christian tradition.

I recall a 2003 lecture by Stafford in Rome in which he argued that the icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Statue of Liberty embody two radically different anthropologies. The Guadalupe image, Stafford said, reflects the view that true liberty means "taking delight in what is right," choosing to orient oneself to God?s truth in a spirit of thanksgiving. The Statue of Liberty, he said, depicts an abstraction derived from the European Enlightenment, one which exalts the absolute autonomy of the individual. Efforts to artificially harmonize these two philosophies, he suggested, end in ruin.

This week Stafford trained his fire on Obama, but driven by belief that being Catholic in America means being counter-cultural, he?s used comparably dramatic imagery in the past to go after other administrations. In February 2003, for example, I interviewed Stafford about Bush?s press for war in Iraq.

"I come at this as a Christian and religious leader who celebrates the Eucharist every day," Stafford said then. "It?s not possible for me to celebrate the Eucharist and at the same time to envision or encourage the prospect of war."

Stafford?s conclusions may be open to debate, but his agenda is not simply to position the Catholic church closer to the Republican Party.

Second, it would also be a mistake to think that Stafford is blind to the positive implications of Obama?s success for race relations. On the contrary, Stafford has a long history of commitment to the civil rights movement, dating back to the early 1960s when he studied community organizing and social work at The Catholic University of America. As a young Baltimore priest in the 1960s, he ran the archdiocese?s charitable efforts in the predominantly African-American inner city. In the 1980s, then-Bishop Stafford of Memphis was considered one of the most outspoken Catholic leaders in the country on racial issues.

Although this is no more than armchair psychology, I suspect part of his disappointment with Obama is precisely that Stafford has long prayed for the day an African-American could be elected president, only for that leader to be on the wrong side, in Stafford?s view, of the towering moral question of our time.

In the full text of his remarks, Stafford said, "Americans were unanimous in their joy over the significance of the election of a black president." Granted, it probably would have been helpful if he had developed the point, much like Cardinal Francis George of Chicago did in his presidential address to the U.S. bishops in Baltimore. On the other hand, it?s worth remembering that Stafford had been asked to speak at the John Paul II Institute not on racism or civil rights, but on *Humane Vitae*, which naturally invited a focus on the "life issues."

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So, where does all this leave us in terms of Vatican/U.S. relations in the Obama age?

Directly, it doesn?t change the calculus at all. Shortly after Obama?s election, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, said the Vatican was interested in working together on Iraq, the Holy Land, Christian minorities in the Middle East and Asia, and the fight against poverty and social inequality. Those open doors were not closed by Stafford?s words.

On the other hand, non-Americans in the Vatican often take their cues on the States from their American colleagues, and Stafford?s broadside is not exactly a glowing recommendation of the new president. In equal and opposite fashion, his speech may have alienated some Democrats, which could make it harder for Catholics to claim a place at the table when decisions are made in the Obama administration. (The typical Democrat may not make fine distinctions between the personal views of the Major Penitentiary, which is the job Stafford holds, and the corporate position of the Vatican.)

Most immediately, the Stafford episode points to an indisputable political truth: If the new Congress and the Obama White House move forward with the **Freedom of Choice Act** [2], then the prospects for collaboration between church and state will become infinitely more complicated. A cultural war would likely erupt, with both sides engaged in "sapping operations against the enemy city."

That, surely, is an apocalyptic scenario all would do well to avoid.

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