

## An unpublished interview with Avery Dulles

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 19, 2008 All Things Catholic

Tributes to Cardinal Avery Dulles, who died last week at the age of 90, have already been penned by people who knew him far better than I did, and who are in a much stronger position to assess his theological legacy. At that level, all I can add to what's already been written is "amen."

What I can contribute to the mix of remembrances, however, are the contents of a previously unpublished interview I had with Dulles two years ago, in October 2006, as part of the research for my forthcoming book on "Megatrends in Catholicism."

I had met Dulles in person only once before, in a spot not exactly conducive to forming deep bonds of intimacy. It was high atop the Jesuit curia building in Rome, overlooking St. Peter's Square, at the time of his installation as a member of the College of Cardinals in 2001. He had agreed to sandwich in a brief interview with me between scrums of TV crews. (To be honest, I think he did so only because his master of ceremonies for that string of events was his fellow New York Jesuit Fr. Keith Pecklers, a professor of liturgy in Rome and a mutual friend.) Nonetheless, when I asked Dulles for an extended interview some five years later, he instantly recalled our meeting on that occasion - a touch of the legendary Dulles graciousness. He invited me to come out to his office on Fordham's Bronx campus to spend a leisurely fall morning talking about the future of Catholicism.

As things turned out, God called Dulles home before the book appeared, so this seems an appropriate moment to share what may have been among his last lengthy, forward-looking reflections.

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I began by explaining the gist of my project, which is to identify the most important forces shaping the future of the Catholic church over the next 100 years. Dulles did not hesitate to offer his candidate: "The internal solidification of Catholicism," he said, a project that Dulles said began under Pope John Paul II and continues under Pope Benedict XVI.

I pressed Dulles to explain what he meant.

"Restoring clarity where there had been confusion in the period following the Second Vatican Council," Dulles said. "Rebuilding a strong sense of Catholic identity, including a clear repudiation of the notion that church history can be divided into a 'before' and 'after' Vatican II. You can see this working itself out today in theology,

in liturgy, in religious life ? both popes have emphasized the organic connection between the 'now' of the church and what came before."

Interestingly, Dulles hazarded the guess that this "internal solidification," as it plays out over the next half-century or so, might carry the church back to different positions on some matters than those taken by the popes who unleashed it.

Specifically, Dulles said, his hunch was that the church may ultimately return to a "more traditional posture" on both the death penalty and the idea of a "just war." Recent popes, Dulles conceded, beginning with John XXIII, seem to have taken quasi-abolitionist positions on both matters. Yet used sparingly and with safeguards to protect the interests of justice, Dulles argued, both the death penalty and war have, over the centuries, been recognized by the church as legitimate, sometimes even obligatory, exercises of state power. The momentum of "internal solidification," he said, may lead to some reconsideration of these social teachings.

As a thought exercise, I challenged Dulles.

Let's assume, I said, that this internal solidification succeeds, and that 50 years from now ferment around questions such as women's ordination or the authority of the pope is considered largely passé. Nonetheless, given how big and complex the Catholic church is, it will always have a liberal wing. Might the steady closing of internal debates, I asked, have the unintended effect of shifting liberal Catholic energies from the *ad intra* to the *ad extra* realm - thereby reinforcing broadly progressive positions on social issues such as the death penalty and war? That seems an especially tempting hypothesis, I suggested, since those stances appear to enjoy strong support among Catholics from regions such as Africa and Asia, which will be increasingly influential in the 21st century.

Dulles paused for a moment, and then said, "Well, I hadn't thought of it that way, but you could be right." At that stage, one could sense his mental wheels begin to turn, as Dulles tapped his capacity to find something commendable even in currents with which he disagreed.

If a new wave of *ad extra* energy should carry the church towards greater activism around progressive social causes, Dulles said, it could also have the effect of better embodying Catholic teaching on the true nature of the role of the laity, which he described as being in the world rather than inside the church.

"The lay vocation is primarily *ad extra*," Dulles said. "It's about being a Christian leaven in the world, evangelizing your own neighborhood, your own family, your profession, and your social contexts. There's not really a great deal of that being done."

In that regard, Dulles said he aligned with critics of the concept of "lay empowerment" that emerged after the Second Vatican Council, which often treats the lay role in terms of *ad intra* functions: a lector, Eucharistic minister, director of religious education, pastoral association, diocesan chancellor, and so on. In the end, Dulles observed, only a tiny minority of lay Catholics will ever play one of those roles, however valuable they may be. For the vast majority of laity, the arena of their ministry will either be the secular world or nothing at all.

In that light, Dulles said, "it would be a very good thing if the church comes to see the model of an empowered lay person as someone doing something for the Gospel out in the world, rather than moving in the sacristy" - even if, he added with a smile, he might find some of that energy misdirected.

I then pressed Dulles about another possible unintended consequence of "internal solidification." In today's ecclesiastical politics, I suggested, proposals for internal reform are sometimes viewed with caution, not necessarily on their own merits, but out of fear that they may be a Trojan horse for a broader agenda of dissent. Thus when a group such as "Voice of the Faithful" advocates more collaborative models of decision-making, some critics take that as a wedge in the door for a broader attack on the hierarchical structure of the church.

Might it be, I asked, that if internal solidification succeeds, a new climate will emerge in which some of these non-doctrinal reforms could get a more receptive hearing? In other words, is there a possible paradox: The more "conservative" the church becomes, the more open it might become to certain kinds of change?

"It very well might," Dulles said. "Of course, each proposal would have to be examined on its own merits, but you're right that sometimes these discussions are clouded by concern over where they might lead."

If bishops felt more secure that a strong sense of Catholic identity were not at risk, Dulles said, they might feel more inclined to "tinker" with some of the internal "machinery" of the church. Dulles added that in his experience, priests are usually among the first to support lay collaboration, "because it allows them to spend more time doing the things for which they were ordained - hearing confessions, celebrating the other sacraments, doing basic pastoral work."

We also discussed ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, areas in which Dulles had long been a key Catholic participant. (Among other things, we spoke about the "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" initiative, put together by Fr. Richard John Neuhaus and Charles Colson. Noting that some young evangelicals he met through that work had since converted to Catholicism, Dulles joked, "If things keep going like that, we won't have anyone left to talk to!")

At the time we sat down, Dulles had recently brought out a revised edition of his 1971 book, *A History of Apologetics*. In it, Dulles makes the point Christianity's original experts on Islam were neither impartial scholars nor specialists in inter-faith dialogue, but medieval apologists - writers from the 7th through the 14th centuries who articulated a strong defense of Christianity in light of Islamic critique.

I laid out my own take on what's happening. Since Vatican II, I suggested, Catholics have understood relations with the religious "other" almost exclusively in terms of dialogue. (As proof, the terms "inter-religious relations" and "inter-religious dialogue" are used almost interchangeably, rather than seeing "dialogue" as part of a broader approach that would also include apologetics and mission.) In part, that's because our paradigm for inter-faith relations has been Judaism, and in the ecumenical field it's been the Orthodox - cases in which Catholics are often cast as the historical aggressor, and our instinct has been to atone.

Today, however, we're facing a new world. The paradigmatic inter-faith relationship is now with Islam, and the

most dynamic force on the Christian scene is Pentecostalism. In both cases, Catholics, especially outside the West, are more likely to see themselves as victims rather than victimizers - of Islamic radicalism in some parts of the world, of Pentecostal proselytism in others. For that reason, a growing number of Catholics, especially in the global South, are inclined to see relations with the religious "other" not exclusively in terms of atonement, but also self-defense.

Might that, I asked Dulles, stimulate a comeback for the lost art of apologetics?

"I think so, and in the West it's also influenced by secular critiques of religious belief, by the trivialization of faith itself," Dulles said. "For a while, we basically stopped teaching apologetics in the seminaries and in our universities, and that's left us somewhat vulnerable."

Dulles said requests to update his book on apologetics shows that interest in "the somewhat forgotten tradition of offering a reasoned defense of the faith, in light of contemporary objections," is growing. He added that he's not sure writers such as Cardinal Juan Torquemada or Savonarola, both of whom figure in his book, necessarily offer the best models for contemporary apologetics, pointing instead to masters such as Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal and John Henry Newman.

He urged today's would-be apologists to learn from the past - both the distinctions worked out by previous generations, as well as the mistakes they made.

"If it's going to work, apologetics has to be deeply respectful of the positions of others, and it has to be clearly grounded in reason," Dulles said.

"We have to show that it is reasonable to believe, that faith isn't a purely subjective or emotional stance," Dulles said. "Then we can show that it's reasonable to believe what the Catholic church teaches - without, of course, eliminating the element of mystery, as if every element of Christian faith can be proven like a geometric theorem."

As we wrapped up, Dulles gave me his direct phone number and urged me to call "anytime." He also made me promise to send him a copy of the book when it appeared, something I regret that I now will not have the opportunity to do.

"Of course," he said as I was leaving, "I hope you're talking to plenty of people other than me. Don't take anything I say as Gospel!"

Then his final thought: "By all means, write the book," he said. "It's a good exercise to think about the future of the church. But it's even more important to pray about it, because neither you nor I really know what's going to happen."

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My interview with Dulles came not long after Pope Benedict XVI's lecture at the University of Regensburg, and I asked the cardinal to offer some comments about Catholic/Muslim relations for my weekly column. That previously published portion of our interview can be found here:

<http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/pfw100606.htm> [1]

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