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Vatican speaking for voiceless global poor

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All Things Catholic

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Let's begin with a pop quiz: Which of the following headlines about Pope Benedict XVI does not belong in a list of recent events which became a cause célèbre?

- A. Pope lifts excommunication of Holocaust-denying bishop
- B. Pope says condoms make AIDS worse
- C. Pope increasingly 'isolated,' insiders claim
- D. Pope emerges as voice of the poor in economic crisis

The correct answer is, of course, 'D,' in that it's the lone entry that has not triggered a global avalanche of punditry. The image of Benedict XVI as a tribune for the world's poor, therefore, would probably not naturally spring to mind for the average person if asked what the pope has been up to lately.

That's too bad, because while most world leaders these days fret over the middle class, the financial sector, ailing auto companies, and so on -- all, of course, utterly legitimate concerns for elected officials -- the pope has been striking a different, and badly needed, note.

During his recent trip to Angola, Benedict XVI insisted that the poor 'must not become one of the casualties' of the economic crisis, and pledged that the Catholic church 'will always be found standing alongside the poorest of this continent.' Nor did Benedict restrict himself to pious exhortations. He got down to brass tacks, demanding that developed nations live up to their 'oft-repeated promise' to devote 0.7 percent of their Gross National Product to assistance for impoverished nations.

Senior Vatican officials have taken the pope's lead. This week, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, released a message to the G-8 "Social Summit," which brought together labor ministers from the G-8 nations as well as China, Brazil, Mexico, India, South Africa and Egypt in Rome March 29-31. Bertone argued that fine-tuning economic structures is not enough; the economy must be given a "human face," the cardinal insisted, including guarantees of a "basic level of income and security" for the millions of persons who have recently lost jobs because of economic contraction.

The pope took up the fate of the poor again in a hard-hitting letter to British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, in conjunction with this week's G-20 meeting in London. Benedict wrote that his Africa trip had allowed him to "see first-hand the reality of severe poverty and marginalization, which the crisis risks aggravating dramatically." Benedict expressed concern that the poor may not be sufficiently visible in the G-20, since "sub-Saharan Africa is represented by just one state and some regional organizations." That imbalance, Benedict wrote, "must prompt a profound reflection among the summit participants, since those whose voice has least force in the political scene are precisely the ones who suffer most from the harmful effects of a crisis for which they do not bear responsibility." The pope closed by insisting that the elimination of extreme poverty by 2015, as called for by the United Nations Millennium Goals, "remains one of the most important tasks of our time."

These papal interventions are timely, as the world's poorest nations and people desperately need someone to take a stand on their behalf -- doing something more articulate, and effective, than smashing a few bank windows in downtown London.

Development experts say the crisis has placed poor countries in a "triple whammy," formed by a withdrawal of lending by risk-averse banks, a flight of foreign investment, and skyrocketing interest rates. Impoverished nations likewise face falling prices for agricultural and mining commodities, growing unemployment, and the threat of protectionist trade policies that could further exclude their products from global markets. As a result, aid agencies have warned that millions of people in developing nations could backslide into extreme poverty in 2009. As many as half a million infants could die from a combination of malnutrition and inadequate sanitation and health care.

In response, the World Bank has proposed a new "vulnerability fund," asking developed countries to devote 0.7 percent of their fiscal stimulus packages to provide a basic safety net in poor nations and to support at-risk areas such as infrastructure and agriculture. If such investments are to gain political traction, the world's premier spiritual leaders and voices of conscience need to mobilize public opinion.

That's precisely what Benedict XVI and his lieutenants have been trying to do, but so far it's been hard to break through the noise generated by the melees over condoms and Holocaust-denying bishops. That reality encapsulates the hidden cost of the Vatican's PR woes: It's not just the negative reaction generated by the episode itself, but the way in which it becomes more difficult for the church to exercise moral leadership on any other subject.

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Perversely, all the negative media attention of late probably means that Benedict XVI's Holy Week messages this year will be more closely scrutinized than normal. In the spirit of taking lemons and making lemonade, it's a chance for the pope to put an exclamation point on his recent teaching -- and, in the crass language of public relations, to get back into the "win column."

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Apropos of the great condom debate, the tendency these days in much Catholic discussion is to insist that Benedict XVI had a point when he said on March 17 that condoms "actually increase the problem" of AIDS. Even secular experts have come to his defense; writing in the *Washington Post* March 29, Edward Green of Harvard's School of Public Health observed that "condom orthodoxy" in the West runs afoul of empirical data suggesting that African nations which have had success in combating AIDS are those which have emphasized behavioral changes, meaning abstinence outside marriage, rather than relying primarily on condoms.

That tracks with what many AIDS experts in Africa, including several not affiliated with the Catholic church, told me last week. The problem, they said, is not with a condom's physical capacity to prevent transmission of the virus. The problem instead is its psychological and cultural impact; too often, they said, it creates a false sense of invulnerability, encouraging risky behavior.

Nonetheless, focusing on what Benedict said risks neglecting an equally urgent discussion of how and when he said it.

Whatever one makes of "condom orthodoxy," it's obviously a fact of life in elite Western circles of opinion. (Witness Maureen Dowd's gratuitous remark in the March 29 *New York Times* that the pope's line amounted to "international lunacy.") Any challenge to it is destined to be explosive, and therefore it's not something you can simply drop in as a fleeting aside during a session with reporters aboard the papal plane. If the Vatican wanted to take it on, some preparation was in order. Vatican officials could have been standing by with copies of Green's study to distribute to the press. African AIDS experts could have been on hand to offer their own testimony.

It won't do to suggest that the pope was caught off guard, since the Vatican spokesperson collects these questions from reporters in advance. If Benedict wanted to wade into the condom debate, there was time to do it right.

Moreover, there's also the question of when to raise the subject. By going to Africa, Benedict wanted to throw a spotlight on the growth and vitality of the faith there, as well as to engage burning social issues such as poverty, war, corruption, and human rights. By making condoms the dominant story line on day one, he all but dared the global press to ignore everything else. Had he waited a couple of days, other storylines could have emerged.

In other words, even when the pope has a legitimate point to make, it's still incumbent upon him and his advisors to be smart about how it's delivered. That's not a matter of letting the media dictate to the pope, or the church; it's a matter of making sure that what's pitched is also what's caught.

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Last week I offered my take on what African Catholicism has to offer the global church in the 21st century, describing it as "liberation theology without the hang-up about authority." By that, I meant that the energy of the African church is typically directed at broad social transformation, not insider Catholic baseball, and that Africans are inclined to accent harmony in the church rather than pitting a "church from below" against the bishops.

That essay drew a wide range of reactions, but perhaps the most notable -- at least in terms of star power -- came from Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo, the famed Zambian exorcist and renegade Catholic

prelate. Milingo's on-again, off-again, then on-again break with Rome in 2001, symbolized by his marriage to a Korean bride selected by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, offered one of the most compelling soap operas in recent Catholic memory. In 2006, Milingo ordained four bishops without papal permission as part of his "Married Priests Now!" movement, triggering an automatic excommunication.

Now based in South Korea, where the headquarters of Moon's "Family Federation for World Peace and Unification" is located, Milingo sent along the following comment:

I have read your "African-style liberation theology" article twice. In reality, there is neither theology nor liberation [in much African Catholicism]. ... It is a pity that Africans have not been united in voicing themselves in matters so important for Christian development. Those who have raised their voices, in an effort to stress a renewing approach to Catholicism in Africa, have been officially silenced. For example, the Tanzanian co-founder of the East- African Catholic University in Kenya later left the university and founded his own church. A Jesuit Cameroonian [Englebert Mveng] died a mysterious death. African thoughts, in other words, are inhibited. The "yes men", bishops and priests, are in office to represent themselves, not the Africans. They have to be good boys to the Vatican for further promotions, not for the service of the Church.

Liberation theology in Latin America opposed teaching the "virtue" of poverty to the poor, when the masters did not themselves live in poverty. These "masters" included the church, which was in every way part of the upper class, the privileged and the rich. The target of liberation theology in South America was a form of theology inconsistent with the true teaching of Jesus Christ. Even now that he's been put out of the Roman Catholic Church, Fr. [Leonardo] Boff still speaks as a defender of the poor in Latin America, who have been colonized both by the governments and by the churches of the West.

I'm sorry to say that Africa has no such liberation theology. They're dealing only with how to adapt traditional theology to the idioms of local cultural language. They are simply translating Western theology into idiomatic African language [rather than generating a truly African theology]. If you want any further discussion on these matters, let me know.

Quite apart from its merits, the reply may also be noteworthy as a sign of renewed eagerness from Milingo to inject himself into Catholic debates. If so, at least the press corps ought to be happy -- things on the Catholic beat are always a little less dull when Milingo is in the house.

On Monday, March 30, I delivered a keynote address at the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators convocation, held this year in Oak Brook, Ill. The association brings together human-resource officers for dioceses, religious orders and other groups within the Catholic church.

I hung around the edges of the conference for a while, and doing so offered an object lesson in the two different levels at which the Catholic church is struggling to respond to the current economic crisis. On the one hand, the church acts as a voice of conscience, applying its social teaching to broad public-policy debates; on the other hand, the church is also itself a large financial enterprise obliged to make hard choices about how to cope with declining resources and mounting costs.

The group assembled in Oak Brook represented the church's frontline in responding to this second set of challenges.

Inevitably, some of the realities they face will not be pleasant. I sat in one session, for example, where Maureen Murphy, senior counsel for the Chicago archdiocese, was doling out advice about how to handle termination procedures. One tip: Never put the reasons for firing someone in a termination letter. Given the emotional pressures of the moment, she said, such a letter will often be hasty and not fully considered. If the employee later challenges the firing and the employer offers reasons that weren't in the letter, it can complicate things.

Murphy stressed that as a matter of justice, anyone being let go obviously deserves an explanation of the reasons why, which ought to be presented in a personal meeting. In an ideal world, she said, those conversations should also have come earlier in the game, so that when the end comes it's no surprise.

Other practical bits of counsel:

- Don't let parish employees put in overtime disguised as unpaid "volunteer" work. If they work more than 40 hours, they ought to be paid. In any event, Murphy said, lawyers like to take up overtime disputes, because if they prevail they can claim not just back pay for the client but also attorney's fees.
- Don't use e-mail as a way of avoiding dealing with personnel problems on a face-to-face basis. "People say things in e-mails that they wouldn't in person," Murphy observed, "and sometimes that means civility is lost."

There were also flashes of gallows humor. One human-resources director told the story of a pastor who called the office to say that a parish employee had offered to resign, and the pastor wanted to know if he should accept. The director said yes, under the logic that if things deteriorate to the point where someone volunteers to quit, it's usually wise to accept. That prompted the pastor to ask: "Does it make any difference if the guy is crying?" Grim chuckles rippled through the room, suggesting that this was a scenario with which human-resources people are all too familiar. Alas, the crisis undoubtedly means that such scenes may become even more common, as parishes, dioceses and other entities face pressure to cut payroll costs.

I also sat in on a session led by human-resources directors for the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary and the Adrian Dominicans, which was devoted to how to handle the personnel implications of a merger between religious congregations. Though the session featured a lot of nuts-and-bolts specifics, the basic advice seemed to be to take time to listen and to be sure everyone's on board, rather than to indulge an administrator's instinctive desire to "get things done."

In her keynote Tuesday morning, Carol Fowler, director of personnel services for the Chicago archdiocese, invited her colleagues to take a "glass half full" perspective on the crisis.

"This is our time," Fowler told the audience, arguing that the church's bean counters and human-resources experts aren't just support staff anymore, but critically important leaders in helping the church utilize its resources more effectively, so that its core goals and values aren't compromised.

Fowler insisted that the church's administrative professionals think of themselves as ministers, not just managers. She pointed to the tone set by Cardinal Francis George in Chicago, who, she said, regularly asks during budget meetings, "How does everything in your budget help people come closer to Jesus Christ?"

Fowler called upon the church's human-resources officers to become more "strategic," not simply

reacting to problems as they arise, but anticipating challenges and devising responses before the dam bursts. Specifically, she recommended:

- Developing better methods for assessing performance, in order to encourage good work and to address deficiencies before they fester. (Fowler ruefully said that personnel assessment is something the church doesn't do very well. When a pastor calls to say that a parish employee has to go, Fowler said, she asks him to send along the personnel file. Often enough, she said, the file contains one of two things: nothing at all, or glowing evaluations that provide little basis for termination. "We have to get better," she said.)
- Projecting gaps and needs in staffing, in order to devise effective recruitment and retention strategies. In a time of crisis, she said, "making sure the right people are in the right jobs" is essential.
- Planning for transitions in leadership in key areas.
- In terms of where to invest limited resources these days, Fowler observed that the first line item in a budget to be cut during times of crisis is often funding for leadership training and development "which, she noted, can sound a bit like "fluff." In reality, she said, "it should be exactly the opposite," because moments of crisis are precisely when good leadership instincts are at a premium.

Fowler's bottom line seemed to be that the church needs its human-resources people "and, more broadly, its financial and administrative professionals" to step up. Those who answer the call, she suggested, have a golden opportunity to lead. As part of that picture, Fowler added, they can help ensure that the social justice that the church preaches to the outside world is actually practiced in its own house.

The National Association of Church Personnel Administrators Web site can be found at www.nacpa.org.

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