

A few slices of Catholic life

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 21, 2009 All Things Catholic

Reading the Vatican paper, Asia's Joan of Arc, Nazi analogies, and more

The past week has been one of those periods when there isn't a single dominant Catholic story, but rather plenty of interesting nuggets. The following, therefore, represent a few slices of Catholic life in mid-August.

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L'Osservatore Romano is at it again. Gian Maria Vian has been the Vatican paper's editor-in-chief for less than three years, and in that short arc of time *L'Osservatore* has probably spawned more news headlines, blog chatter, and water cooler buzz than in its previous three decades.

Most famously in the United States, Vian editorialized in May that Barack Obama is "not a pro-abortion president," triggering an avalanche of commentary and speculation about who exactly *L'Osservatore* speaks for in the Vatican power structure.

This week, *L'Osservatore* went on the offensive in the case of Pius XII, the wartime pontiff whose alleged "silence" on the Holocaust has long been a subject of controversy. Citing the diary of Henry Morgenthau Jr., U.S. Secretary of the Treasury during the war years, *L'Osservatore* charged that both the United States and Great Britain had detailed knowledge of the Nazi campaign to annihilate the Jews but did nothing to stop it. Just three days earlier, *L'Osservatore* hailed a deal between financial authorities in Switzerland and the United States to reveal the identities of suspected tax dodgers who stash their loot in Swiss banks, calling it "a step forward toward that model of ethical finance described by Benedict XVI" in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. Both editorials drew significant coverage around the world, sparking praise in some quarters and critique in others.

Here's what one should probably understand about *L'Osservatore*.

Among veteran Vatican-watchers, what Vian has accomplished is considered nothing short of a miracle. Prior to his arrival, one read the Vatican paper for the same reason that Kremlinologists used to read *Pravda*: for subtle, sometimes inscrutable clues to the thinking in the halls of power. Under Vian's direction, *L'Osservatore* has instead become a compelling journalistic product in its own right -- unpredictable, provocative, with something fresh and incisive to say about the big stories of the day. The editorial team isn't simply sitting around waiting for officialdom to pronounce on an issue before wading into the waters.

That's enormously commendable, and Vian isn't the only one to merit kudos. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State and the man who appointed Vian, as well as his boss, Pope Benedict XVI, deserve credit for allowing *L'Osservatore* to flower. Despite perceptions of the Vatican as a rigidly controlled environment, here's a case where the pope and his team have allowed talented subordinates to chart their own course in full public view.

However, this also means that *L'Osservatore* can no longer be read as a direct guide to the official thinking of

the Holy See. It's not accurate anymore to craft headlines such as "Vatican blasts U.S. for Holocaust inaction" or "Vatican commends bank secrecy deal" simply because editorials to that effect appeared in *L'Osservatore Romano* .

Instead, what one sees these days represents no more, and no less, than an interesting Catholic take on the news. Obviously Vatican officials read *L'Osservatore*, and on many matters its editorials probably represent a current of thought at senior levels in the church. What relationship those editorials have to eventual Vatican policy, however, is increasingly hard to determine.

So, by all means read *L'Osservatore Romano* -- more likely than not, you'll be impressed. But don't presume that what you find on Monday will be a papal edict by Tuesday.

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When former President Corazon "Cory" Aquino of the Philippines died from colon cancer on August 1, she was hailed as a popular saint for having led the 1986 "People Power" uprising that toppled the regime of Ferdinand Marco, and then guiding her country into democracy.

At least one former Aquino aide, and a devout Catholic, believes that she deserves the formal kind of sainthood too.

William Esposito, a Filipino journalist who ran Aquino's media operation during the People Power uprising and her presidential campaign, has called her the "Joan of Arc of Asia" and believes that church officials ought to launch a formal canonization process. (I met Esposito, a longtime member of Focolare, some years ago during a Focolare event in Italy. He's a serious Catholic, so his proposal is not some casual journalistic conceit.)

Writing in *The Philippine Star*, Esposito said that "Like the Maid, Cory electrified her nation into patriotic passion and vanquished the tyrants of the land."

Aquino's central contrast with Joan of Arc, Esposito suggested, is one that almost makes Aquino the more attractive candidate for sainthood: "Cory would only accede to non-violent political activism ? Cory discouraged armed struggle and preferred to entrust her fate and that of her people to the love and justice of God."

Esposito's bottom line: "Cory C. Aquino was just about the closest, if not the perfect specimen, that the world of politics will produce that could qualify to be a saint."

It's too early to know whether the Filipino church will indeed set the wheels in motion. Yet given how much emphasis the Vatican is placing these days on the relationship between faith and politics, Aquino could be a powerful role model -- sort of a cross, if Esposito will permit me to extend his image, between Joan of Arc and Thomas More. Needless to say, bestowing such an honor upon a lay woman would also have its own significance.

I'd vote for canonizing Cory, if for no other reason than that the image of thousands of yellow-clad Filipinos flooding St. Peter's Square ought to be a sight to see.

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Two Vatican-sponsored investigations of women religious in America -- one a comprehensive visitation of women's communities, the other a doctrinal review of the Leadership Conference of Woman Religious -- continue to stir anxiety. As *NCR* has reported, the LCWR met August 11-14 in New Orleans, calling for transparency about what's motivating the investigations and who's paying for them, and urging that women

religious be able to see whatever reports are eventually generated.

On Thursday, the French Catholic paper *La Croix* spoke with Daughters of Wisdom Sr. Louise Madore, a Canadian who leads the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), an international association for leaders of women's orders based in Rome. Madore recalled that when the visitation was announced last February, the UISG's executive committee issued a statement calling upon American orders "to cooperate fully," and also expressing "full and unambiguous support for our sisters in the United States."

Madore told *La Croix* that she has had contacts since that time with Mother Clare Millea, the Rome-based superior of the Congregation of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus who's leading the apostolic visitation.

"Naturally, we encourage our sisters to participate in this visit," Madore told *La Croix*. "But we don't have any information on the process that will be followed. Certain authorities tell us that our sisters will have access to the final report, others say no." Madore said it was also unclear to the UISG exactly which communities will be visited and who will be conducting those visits.

She suggested that while the UISG wants to be supportive, the American orders will play the lead role.

"Because we're made up of international congregations, our American sisters are only one among our many faces," Madore said.

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In my forthcoming book *The Future Church* (note: the on-sale date is November 10), I make the argument that "evangelical Catholicism" is one of the defining currents in Catholic life. In a nutshell, evangelical Catholicism means a strong reassertion of traditional Catholic identity -- a "politics of identity" designed to protect the church from secularism. This push is being felt across the board, from liturgy to higher education to religious life, but it tends to be most visible in a strong assertion of church teaching on sexuality and the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death.

A watershed moment came in Germany in the mid-1990s, when the Vatican, led by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, insisted that the German church withdraw from the country's abortion counseling system. Under German law, women who want an abortion must get a certificate proving they've had counseling. By the mid-1990s, there were 1,700 counseling centers in Germany, with 270 of them Catholic. Statistics showed that Catholic centers counseled 20,000 women each year, of whom 5,000 chose to keep their babies or give them up for adoption.

The situation posed a classic ethical dilemma: Was the church thereby saving 5,000 lives a year, or was it complicit in 15,000 abortions?

The Vatican took the latter view, and insisted that the bishops withdraw. After a long period of back-and-forth negotiations, the German bishops complied. Some prominent German laity, however, chose to defy that decision and kept the centers open under the name *Donum Vitae*, or "gift of life." Ever since, evangelically-minded Catholics have criticized these centers for fudging the church's witness on abortion.

Recent days brought echoes of that battle, in the form of tensions surrounding the *Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken*, or ZdK, the "Central Committee of German Catholics" -- a union of lay organizations considered to be the most powerful lay body in the world.

The ZdK presidency is seen as a prestigious gig, not just in the German church but in national politics. The incumbent, Hans Joachim Meyer, is stepping down after twelve years, and a struggle is unfolding around the

succession. Not long ago, Heinz Wilhelm Brockmann, a minister in the German state of Hesse, seemed the slam-dunk choice. The process went into tilt, however, when the German bishops' conference and a determined minority within the ZdK objected, on the basis that Brockmann was one of the co-founders of the Donum Vitae centers.

Recently the name of another prominent German politician has been floated for the job: Alois Glück, a former president of the Bavarian parliament. What fortune Glück may have (whose name in German, by the way, means "luck") remains to be seen, since he too has been involved in the Donum Vitae centers, albeit not as a co-founder. At the moment, a ZdK nominating committee is working on finding a consensus candidate, and a vote is supposed to be held at the body's plenary assembly in late November in Bonn.

For outsiders, this German saga illustrates a point with which anyone moving in the Catholic church these days must come to terms: There is no future for any individual or movement not clearly grounded in a robust sense of Catholic identity, including the church's pro-life message ? at least if that individual or movement hopes to have any sort of official standing, or any relationship with the powers that be.

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By most accounts, the defining geopolitical reality of the 21st century will be "multipolarism," meaning a global system with multiple centers of power. The most obvious new poles are China and India, who together account for almost forty percent of the world's population, and whose combined GNP by mid-century is projected to rival that of the United States and the European Union together.

Catholic leaders in Asia could play a lead role in helping the church to navigate this new multipolar world. In that light, the ninth plenary assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, which wrapped up Sunday in Manila, offered an intriguing glimpse into the concerns and priorities of the Asian bishops.

The official theme was "Living the Eucharist in Asia," and the bishops seemed determined that the church's Eucharistic faith act as a resource for transforming Asian societies.

"We cannot celebrate the Eucharist and at the same time maintain, practice or tolerate discrimination based on religion or race, culture or language, caste or class," the bishops said in a concluding statement.

They called for exploring the Eucharist as an instrument of reconciliation, especially amid war and rising nationalism. In particular, the bishops cited challenges created by fundamentalist movements in India, where the pressure comes from Hindu nationalists, and Pakistan, where the problem tends to be Islamic radicalism.

The bishops called for bringing a Eucharistic perspective to social ills such as materialism, the separation of families due to armed conflict or unemployment, forms of loneliness that breed depression and suicide, and the welfare of vulnerable groups such as immigrants, women and children.

The bishops also endorsed the use of Asian "symbols, melodies and values" in Eucharistic worship, in order to promote the inculturation of Catholicism in Asian societies.

One conclusion seems clear: The accent in the Asian church is decidedly *ad extra*, meaning focused on the church's role out in the world, rather than *ad intra*, consumed by insider Catholic baseball. How that accent will play out in the years to come -- especially, perhaps, how it will interact with, and potentially recalibrate, evangelical Catholicism in the West -- will be a fascinating story to track.

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Speaking of an *ad extra* emphasis, recent days have seen a spate of outspoken Catholic commentary on pressing social issues in various parts of the world.

- In Argentina, Bishop Jorge Casaretto, president of the social commission of the bishops' conference, demanded that the government of Cristina Kirchner adopt policies to protect the country's youth. "In Argentina, one child in ten suffers from hunger, one in four has no place to sleep, and 40 percent live in poverty," Casaretto said in a statement.
- In Mexico, Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera denounced mounting violence in the country, including the recent assassination of a prominent journalist. "This violence is produced by social decomposition," Rivera Carrera said on August 6, insisting that the key to restoring peace is combating Mexico's social ills.
- In Peru, Bishop Norbert Strotmann Hoppe denounced the chronic mistreatment of indigenous persons in an interview with Vatican Radio. "Many native communities have tried for decades to obtain property titles for the land where they live, only to find themselves hunted when the government grants those titles to private investors" seeking to exploit the resources of the Amazon, Strotmann said.
- In Colombia, Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos confirmed that he's had phone conversations with leaders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, in an effort to mediate the country's decades-long civil war. Catholic leaders in Colombia have pressed the government of President Alvaro Uribe to speed up the process of national reconciliation.
- In Gambia, the Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone West Africa, assembled in Banjul, called upon African nations to combat a "brain drain" of talented youth by ending conflicts, promoting employment, and fighting corruption.
- In Kenya, the National Council of Churches, an ecumenical body in which the Catholic church plays an important role, has called for new national elections, denouncing the current regime for "shielding the perpetrators of the post-election violence of 2008 and those who bear the greatest responsibility for crimes against humanity."
- In Zimbabwe, the Christian Alliance, another ecumenical body with strong Catholic participation, has called for a special commission to adjudicate the violence that surrounded its own 2008 elections. The alliance declared that three days of reconciliation called for by the government will be "useless without a complete revelation of what happened during this period."

This quick round-up underscores an important insight about the global South, which is that church leaders often play a directly political role that by northern standards of church/state separation can seem excessive. Often that's because under authoritarian regimes, or in places where the political class is perceived as corrupt, churches are the only spheres where a genuine form of civil society and a voice for the common good can take shape.

One other point: The Catholic church is occasionally faulted for failures to speak out about social problems, and sometimes the criticism is merited. What these episodes suggest, however, is that there are also times when the right question isn't why the church fails to speak, but why others fail to listen.

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You know American political debate has gone off the rails when CNN's "Situation Room" found it necessary on Wednesday to assemble a panel of pundits to discuss when it's appropriate to make comparisons to Hitler. The trigger was the recent series of raucous town hall meetings on health care reform, which featured opponents carrying pictures of President Barack Obama with a Hitler mustache.

CNN's panel soberly concluded that Nazi imagery probably ought to be out of bounds. Columnist Clarence Page offered the calming, if literally nonsensical, view that "the Hitler analogy should not be made to anybody but Hitler." (In which case, of course, it wouldn't actually be an analogy, but that's hardly the point.)

Such calls to restraint are obviously welcome in the present climate, but one wonders about pressing them too far. If any reference were to become taboo, the risk would be treating Nazism as a bizarre and isolated chapter in history, with absolutely no relevance or larger lessons for today.

Should the rhetorical police adopt such a standard, perhaps the first public figure to run afoul of it would be Pope Benedict XVI. A German who grew up in the shadow of National Socialism, Benedict frequently invokes the Nazis as a *reductio ad absurdum* for a world without God.

The most recent example came on August 9, during the pope's Sunday Angelus address at Castel Gandolfo.

"The Nazi *lager*, like every extermination camp, can be considered extreme symbols of evil, of the inferno that opens on earth when humanity forgets God and substitutes itself for God, usurping the right to decide what is good and what is evil, to give life and death," the pope said.

Benedict suggested that this tendency did not die with the Nazi regime.

"Unfortunately, this sad phenomenon is not circumscribed to the *lager*," he said. "They are instead the culmination of a vast and widely diffuse reality, often with elusive borders." The name the pope gave to that reality was "contemporary nihilism."

That insight, Benedict suggested, points to the "profound difference" between atheistic humanism and Christian humanism. The former, he said, "exalts liberty as the lone principle of humanity, in contrast to God, and in this way transforms the human person into a god -- but a false god, which makes its own system of behavior based on arbitrariness."

In contrast, Benedict said the Christian saints offer "a credible and exhaustive response" to "the deep crisis of the contemporary world," a response he described as "charity in truth."

Agree with that or not, it's a thought-provoking argument, and I doubt anyone would describe Benedict's handling of the Nazi metaphor as inflammatory or irresponsible. Perhaps, therefore, the rules need to be slightly more sophisticated than a simple "don't go there."

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