

Calling this week in Rome 'eventful' is an understatement

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 9, 2009 All Things Catholic

Rome certainly has its own rhythms, which can be either charming or annoying depending upon your point of view. On the ecclesiastical scene, periods of relative calm alternate with occasional bursts of near-frenzy. This week is one of those peak moments, as even a partial run-down of what's going on will illustrate:

- The Synod for Africa, a gathering of almost 300 bishops from around the world to discuss the promise and the perils of the faith on the continent where it's experienced the most explosive recent growth, is meeting Oct. 4-25. So far, the synod has considered a bewildering variety of topics, from the challenges of Islam and Pentecostalism to the perennial problems of tribalism and ethnicity -- including, notably, echoes of ethnic prejudice inside the church.
- The officers of the United States Conference for Catholic Bishops are in town, making their regular annual rounds of Vatican offices. (On Wednesday, I almost literally ran into Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., vice-president of the conference, on his way to a meeting with Cardinal William Levada of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. We were both walking through a tunnel linking two sides of a street, and I stopped just short of plowing into Kicanas -- who was his usual gracious self.)
- Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, president of the USCCB, presented his new book, *The Difference God Makes*, at the Lateran University on Wednesday. Present were the new U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, Miguel Diaz, and his wife Marian, along with legendary Italian philosopher, politician, and confidante of Pope John Paul II, Rocco Buttiglione.
- Five new saints will be canonized on Sunday, including Fr. Damien of Molokai, the famed Belgian "missionary to the lepers." (Among other things, that's made for the unusual spectacle of Belgian and Hawaiian pilgrims mingling in the streets of Rome).



Diaz is making his first round of public events and comments to

the press since presenting his credentials to Pope Benedict XVI on Oct. 2.

- Leaders of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious, one of two groups for superiors of women's religious orders in the United States -- by reputation, the more conservative one -- are in Rome for regular annual meetings in the Vatican. (I bumped into three officers of the CMSWR in a coffee bar Thursday morning while meeting an old friend who works in the Vatican. That's the thing about Rome; stand near the Vatican long enough, and you'll probably see every Catholic you've ever met, or even heard about.)

- Several religious orders are currently in the middle of their general chapter meetings, or getting ready for them.
- An [article on Tuesday](#) [1] in the Italian paper *Il Foglio* by Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, responding to a friendly essay about U.S. President Barack Obama by Swiss Cardinal George Cottier over the summer, set tongues wagging. (The headline was especially striking: "The Axe of the Redskin Bishop," a reference to Chaput's Native American ancestry, which goes to show that the canons of political correctness often just don't apply in Italy.) In the piece, Chaput suggests that Cottier, while well-meaning, doesn't quite appreciate American political realities.

In light of all that activity, to call this week "eventful" would be an exercise in understatement.

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Speaking of Obama, he of course was named today the winner of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. Just hours after the announcement, the Vatican Press Office released a statement of congratulations. An *NCR* translation from Italian follows:

"The awarding of the Nobel Prize for Peace to President Obama is greeted with appreciation in the Vatican, in light of the commitment demonstrated by the President for the promotion of peace in the international arena, and in particular also recently in favor of nuclear disarmament. It's hoped that this very important recognition will further encourage that commitment, which is difficult but fundamental for the future of humanity, so that the desired results will be obtained."

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I had the opportunity to sit down with D'az this morning for one of his first extended interviews. As ambassador, he's a groundbreaker in multiple ways. Not only is D'az the first Hispanic to hold the position, he's also the first professional theologian (he's currently on extended sabbatical from the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University in Minnesota), not to mention the first parent of school-aged children at the time of his posting.

D'az pointed out that he's a Cuban immigrant who's lived in both the Midwest and the Southeast, and his wife, Marian, has Croatian ancestry -- all of which, he said, gives him a deep appreciation for finding common ground in the midst of diversity. His favorite American adage, he said, is *E pluribus unum* -- "out of many, one."

Though it's obviously early, several veteran diplomats in Rome told *NCR* that so far, D'az has come across as likeable and sharp. The following are a few highlights from our conversation.

In some ways, one could think of D'az and Benedict XVI as a mismatched pair. In terms of his theological outlook, D'az is a disciple of the German Jesuit Karl Rahner, of whom then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger once said that "we lived on different theological planets." Though D'az is uncomfortable with ideological labels ("I don't ever want to be boxed in," he said), he's often seen as representing a broadly progressive streak in Catholicism, while Benedict is an avatar of Catholic tradition.

Beneath those surface contrasts, however, D'az said that he and the pope actually have several things in common. Both come from humble origins, both have been significantly shaped by Benedictine spirituality, and both are theologians lifted out of the academy and into leadership roles.

"We've both been uprooted from the university ? for the sake of service," he said. "I have a passion for theology, but I also know very clearly that I have to sacrifice that piece right now. I know the same thing is true [of Benedict] ? I'm sure he would love to be doing more theology, teaching, and so on."

I asked if a Rahnerian like D'az could find a comfort zone in Rome, where the intellectual climate under Benedict XVI tends to be more heavily indebted to Hans Urs von Balthasar, another German-speaking 20th century theological titan. Von Balthasar's focus was less on the intersection with the world, as in Rahner, and more on the distinctive internal culture of Christianity.

"One of the last theses I directed was on von Balthasar," D'az replied, saying that he particularly appreciated "the tremendous aesthetic dimension" to his thought. Openness to all perspectives, he said, is at the heart of how he sees his role: "I want to be a bridge-builder."

Of course, D'az isn't in Rome as a court theologian, but rather as Obama's representative to the Vatican. He ticked off a series of areas where he thinks the White House and the Vatican can collaborate, including human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, ecology, food security, inter-racial and inter-cultural dialogue, and outreach to youth.

One question mark, however, is whether D'az has the political "juice" to make things happen. He's never been a professional diplomat, he and his wife were not major contributors to the Obama campaign, and he acknowledges that he never even met Obama prior to his appointment.

Is it realistic to believe that D'az will have enough of a pipeline to the White House to move the ball?

"The president has given his full support to my mission here," Diaz said, adding that "he's serious about this relationship."

As indications of that interest, D'az observed that this week, Obama's Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, Spencer Boyer, visited the embassy for "extended conversation" about Vatican relations, and that the embassy is hosting a presidentially-appointed delegation to this weekend's canonization ceremony.

"I've also been in touch with people like Josh DuBois," D'az said, "and he knows the important religious role that the Vatican plays." DuBois, a Pentecostal minister, runs Obama's office for faith-based organizations.

I reminded D'az of the story told by former U.S. Ambassador Raymond Flynn, about how it took him a full week to arrange a phone conversation between President Bill Clinton, the last Democrat to occupy the White House, and Pope John Paul II in the run-up to a 1995 U.N. conference on population control. Flynn uses the story to illustrate what he has described as a lack of interest in Vatican ties in the Clinton administration.

How long, I asked, would it take D'az to get Obama on the phone if the pope wanted to chat?

"I think I've got enough persons connected to the president that, if that were to happen, I could get the president [on the phone]," D'az said. "In fact, the president himself told me before leaving the White House ? he pointed to a number of persons and said, 'If you ever need to get me, you contact so-and-so.'"

"Obviously it's speculation, but I have no doubt that if I needed to get to the president, I have the contacts to do it," D'az said.

(Speaking on background, sources told *NCR* that D'az has at least one other reliable conduit into Obama's inner circle: Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough, who, as it happens, is an alumnus of St. John's University, where Diaz taught.)

D'az's first major step onto the Roman stage comes next week, with a conference organized by the embassy along with Caritas Internationalis, the main umbrella group for Catholic charities around the world, on HIV/AIDS. The event will be held at the Opus Dei-sponsored Santa Croce University, and is also co-sponsored by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers.

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I've been posting regular daily reports on the Synod for Africa, which are available on the [NCR Today blog](#) [2].

At this stage, the synod is still in its opening cycle of speech-making, with each participant getting their five-minute turn at bat to talk about whatever's on their mind. (Some wags dub this part of a synod "the season of 200 sermons.") Sometime next week, the sausage will begin to be ground, as small groups organized by language will begin sifting through everything that's been said, with an eye towards crafting propositions to be submitted to the pope.

Details about what's surfaced so far can be found in my daily reports. Here, I'll simply try to identify a few of the themes that seem to be running through the discussion.

Those themes include:

- The staggering diversity of situations across Africa, especially the difference between overwhelmingly Muslim North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.
- Light and shadows in the relationship with Islam. (According to a new estimate from the Pew Forum, North Africa is home to over 200 million Muslims, by far the largest religious group in the region. Though the Muslim percentage is lower in most of sub-Saharan Africa, the raw total is actually larger, at 240 million. That means Africa is home to some 450 million Muslims, almost one-third of the global Muslim total of 1.57 billion.)
- The perils of tribal and ethnic prejudice, both in the broader society and in the church.
- Challenges in ecumenism, both from mushrooming Pentecostal movements and from the surprising growth of Eastern Orthodoxy, which tends to have a more missionary orientation in Africa.
- Need for a more thorough formation of Africa's burgeoning Catholic population, and a greater commitment to truly African expressions of the faith.
- The influence of foreign NGOs and the Western media -- which are, in the eyes of some bishops, pushing a social liberal agenda on matters such as abortion and homosexuality that runs contrary to Africa's traditional reverence for the family.
- Persecution and suffering among some Christians, including a harrowing 20th century tradition of martyrdom. (Archbishop François Maroy Rusengo from Bukavu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo reported that a parish in his archdiocese was burned down just two days before the synod opened, and he was forced to pay ransom in order to free several of his priests. Maroy left the synod on Thursday to return home to deal with the escalating crisis in Bukavu, buoyed by a letter of solidarity signed by the three co-presidents of the Synod of Bishops in the name of the entire gathering.)
- Economic and political injustice, especially the exploitation of Africa's natural resources by multinational corporations in ways that often don't seem to benefit the local population.
- Ecological crises, including the consequences of global warming and climate change.
- Swelling immigrant populations and related problems, such as human trafficking, as well as growing concern about the reception of African immigrants in the West, especially Europe.

Though the following are hardly the biggest headlines, I'll also pass along five footnotes to capture some of the sights and sounds of the synod.

First, Synods of Bishops rarely attract explicit lobbying, in part because they're merely advisory bodies to the pope. In the run-up to the Synod for Africa, however, at least one bishop got an earful: Bishop George Nkuo of Cameroon, who was invited to a "study week" of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in mid-May, in order to hear arguments in favor of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). African bishops have tended to be skeptical

of GMOs, while the Academy for Sciences has a roster of strongly pro-GMO consultants. Their effort to help nudge Nkuo along, however, brought only mixed results. In his speech to the synod on Wednesday, Nkuo recommended that "Africa should not rush blindly to embrace" GMOs, and that "this technology should be pursued with the greatest care, even if it promises economic salvation." (Not exactly a promising precedent for groups which may be considering similar efforts to shape discussions in future synods.)

Second, U.S. President Barack Obama has been something of a synod-father-in-absentia, generating a striking degree of reaction -- most of it, admittedly, outside the synod hall, and in response to questions from journalists. For the most part, the African bishops seem to regard Obama as a great source of hope, both in the sense of illustrating that people of color can hold important positions, and that he may be able to use his influence to promote justice and good government across Africa. The African prelates seem to be reacting primarily to what Obama symbolizes, rather than his concrete policy positions -- and, of course, it's the latter which have made Obama a controversial figure for many bishops in the United States.

Third, this is the second Synod for Africa, following the first edition in 1994. Anyone comparing the two will be struck by at least one difference: Back in 1994, there was a much fuller calendar of "parallel" events outside the synod, such as symposia, press conferences, and strategy sessions, designed to extend the conversation in the synod hall and, in some cases, to provide input to the synod itself. Informally, Vatican officials put out the word that such events were to be discouraged, or at least played down, this time, and for a very simple reason: Apparently back in 1994, some synod participants developed a spotty attendance record because they were too busy making the rounds of the parallel happenings! (That said, there are still some very interesting events taking place this time too, including gatherings organized by religious orders and missionary groups.)

Fourth, it's sometimes difficult after a synod's first week to predict what concrete "action items" might emerge. This time, however, at least one specific proposal seems to have some traction, and it's something Pope Benedict XVI could do with the stroke of a pen: Appoint a permanent papal representative to the African Union, comparable to the apostolic nuncios (ambassadors) who currently represent the Holy See at the United Nations and its various organizations. The idea was first floated by Archbishop Berhaneyesus Souraphiel of Addis Ababa, where the African Union is headquartered. On Thursday, the proposal was seconded by Auxiliary Bishop Barry Wood of Durban, South Africa, on behalf of the Southern Africa Bishops' Conference. The idea is that the Catholic church might have more influence at the AU if a an authoritative papal envoy, perhaps with the rank of archbishop, were part of the permanent diplomatic corps.

Fifth, the bishops of Africa often share a widespread African frustration with the way their continent is presented in the international media, which typically focuses on a familiar canon of woe: wars, poverty, hunger, and so on. As a result, they are often reluctant to air the "dirty laundry" of the local church when they travel outside Africa, for fear of compounding what are already some fairly negative stereotypes. In that light, the willingness of the bishops so far to speak openly about the church's problems has been especially striking. Bishops have acknowledged that ethnic bias too often colors relations among priests, and between priests and bishops; that there's sometimes a problem with the exercise of power and wealth by church leaders; even that church workers too often aren't paid a living wage, forced to subsist, as Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze memorably put it, on holy water at the end of the month. I mentioned this impressive degree of candor to Archbishop Gabriel Palmer-Buckle of Accra, Ghana, outside the synod hall on Thursday afternoon, who replied: "It's a pity you can't be inside with us, because the conversation has been brutally honest."

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On Tuesday afternoon I had a long conversation with Cardinal George at the North American College about his new book, the transcript of which can be found here: [Cardinal George's plan to evangelize America](#) [3]

On Wednesday evening I attended the formal presentation of the book at the Lateran University, which in some

ways was a typical Italian affair. A professor from the Lateran, for example, delivered a fairly lengthy speech on Christian anthropology and Catholic social teaching, which seemed only tangentially related to the subject matter of the book. One had the sense that the point of the speech was more to lend an air of significance to the event than to actually grapple with the book's ideas.

George was flanked by Robert Royal of the Washington, D.C.-based Faith and Reason Institute. A longtime friend and advisor, Royal helped George talk through some of his ideas as the book was evolving. Asked by George before the evening began to be provocative, Royal supplied perhaps the best line.

"We're talking a lot these days in the United States about a new way of thinking coming out of Chicago," Royal said, in an obvious reference to Obama. "I'd like to suggest that there's also a new way of thinking coming from the archbishop of Chicago!"

For his part, George did his best to summarize the main lines of the book in both Italian and English. One of his more stirring moments came in response to a question from a reporter (for the record, not me), who challenged the cardinal's assertion that contemporary American culture suffers from a crisis in relationships. If you ask most people, this reporter observed, they'll say that they have all kinds of relationships -- with friends, with family, with coworkers. How do you convince them, the reporter asked, that there's actually a problem?

The heart of the crisis, George replied, isn't that people don't have relationships, but rather that in an individualistic culture, they refuse to acknowledge the existence of "relationships that can't be un-chosen ? relationships that, if you break them, you lose yourself."

To see the fallout from that allergy to permanence, George said, all you need to do is look around at the celebrated personalities of our culture, such as actors and sports heroes.

"They peak in their twenties, but look at them later," he said. "Often they die isolated, alone, and broken."

One other point is worth recording. At one stage, a missionary in the audience asked George about the contribution of the church to social transformation, such as ending poverty and armed conflict. His response was telling, reflecting his primordial concern with restoring a strong sense of Catholic identity.

"In the first place, we need to focus on just living as Catholics," George said. "If we strengthen family life, if we have good parishes and good movements, all that will act as a kind of glue, which will then have an impact on the larger social order. It will make it more difficult, for example, to call nations into violence against other nations."

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