NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Is middle ground possible on the Pope?

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 2, 2010 All Things Catholic

More and more, I?m wondering if Karl Rove was right. Rove, of course, famously argued that the ?independent voter? is a myth. Whatever they may tell pollsters, most Americans in their heart of hearts are clearly aligned with one side or the other, so the trick to winning elections is to turn out more of your base than the other side does of theirs.

?Rove?s Law? is about politics, but I?m beginning to suspect it has some traction in Catholic affairs as well.

From the beginning of the current round of the sexual abuse crisis, I?ve tried to make two basic points:

- The two cases from Pope Benedict?s past that have recently come to light, one in Munich and one from his years at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, raise important questions, and the pope needs to answer them in order to move forward.
- Those questions, however, have to be seen in the context of his overall record on the crisis, and particularly since 2001, when John Paul II put then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in charge of reviewing the case files, there?s a lot to be said for that record.

Both, of course, are judgments rather than statements of fact, and thus eminently open to debate. What?s striking about much of the reaction I?ve received, however, is that it?s not focused on the content of what I?ve said but rather my alleged motives for saying it.

For one camp out there, my first point amounts to a ?hatchet job? on the pope, making me complicit in a campaign led by *The New York Times* and other media outlets in trying to bring him down or to wound the church. For another crowd, point two is tantamount to a whitewash in favor of the pope. As one e-mailer put it to me succinctly, ?Don?t you ever get tired of being an apologist for the Vatican??

All of which makes me wonder: On an issue about which people feel so passionately, and one which so easily feeds all sorts of broader agenda about the church, the papacy, the media, and so on, is there actually a constituency for balance? Is there room for middle ground?

That?s something to ponder as this crisis unfolds. In the meantime, I?m on assignment this week working on a future book project. ?All Things Catholic? will return Friday April 9, but for now here?s a sampling of recent commentary I?ve done on the crisis story.

1. New York Times op/ed piece [1] on Sunday, March 28

2. On-line chat for the Washington Post [2] on Tuesday, March 30

3. The Charlie Rose Show [3] on Wednesday, March 31

4. Australian Broadcasting Corporation [4] on Thursday, April 1

5. Southern California Public Radio [5] on Wednesday, March 31

6. NPR?s Talk of the Nation [6] on Monday, March 29

7. CNN?s Campbell Brown show [7] on Thursday, April 1

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/28/opinion/28allen.html
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