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

Report: Pope to launch 'Pontifical Council for New Evangelization'

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 25, 2010 NCR Today

According to a report from a well-connected Italian Vatican writer, Pope Benedict XVI will shortly announce the creation of a ?Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization,? to be presided over by Italian Archbishop Rino Fisichella. The office will be dedicated to rekindling the faith in the developed West, above all Europe and North America.

Assuming that report is correct, it?s striking for at least three reasons:

- It?s the first significant new structure in the Vatican created under Benedict XVI, reflecting his personal interest in the re-evangelization of traditional Christian lands in the West, where centuries of secularization have taken a steep toll;
- The move would amount to a vindication for Fisichella, who has been under fire from some pro-life forces for an allegedly ?soft? stance on abortion as President of the Pontifical Academy for Life;
- It?s also another trace of the influence of the Catholic movement Communion and Liberation upon Pope Benedict, since the suggestion for the creation of a ?Council for the New Evangelization? first came from the movement?s late founder in the early 1980s.

The report was published in the Italian daily *Il Giornale* on Sunday, April 25, 2010, by veteran Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli. He wrote that a formal announcement of the new ?dicastery,? meaning a department within the Vatican, will be made ?in coming weeks.?

The term ?the New Evangelization? was popularized by Pope John Paul II, who used it to refer to efforts to reawaken the faith in traditionally Christian parts of the world, particularly Europe. The idea was that while the developed West was first ?evangelized,? or converted to Christianity, many centuries ago, today it stands in need of a ?new evangelization.?

By way of background, Tornielli writes that the idea for a ?Council for the New Evangelization? was first floated by Fr. Luigi Giussani, founder of the Communion and Liberation movement, in the early 1980s, but was not taken up by Pope John Paul II. More recently, Tornielli reports, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice, himself close to the Communion and Liberation movement, represented the idea to Benedict XVI.

Founded in Milan in 1954 by Giussani, Communion and Liberation was long seen as a more conservative alternative to the center-left ethos of the largest lay movement in Italy, Catholic Action. The movement's best-known leader in the United States is Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete, who has jokingly defined Communion and Liberation as "Opus Dei for lazy Catholics."

tBenedict?s fondness for Communion and Liberation is well known. Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger delivered the homily at Giussani?s funeral Mass in 2005, and a group of consecrated women who are part of the *Memores Domini* group within Communion and Liberation run Benedict?s papal household.

tWhen Ratzinger was elected to the papacy five years ago, many cardinals at the time said they had turned to him because they regarded him as the figure best equipped to respond to the crisis of secularization in the West, especially in Europe. His choice of name, ?Benedict,? was in part a reference to St. Benedict, the founder of European monasticism.

tIn the intervening five years, a series of controversies and scandals during Benedict?s pontificate ? most recently, the global sexual abuse crisis swirling around the Catholic church ? has often obscured that aim and arguably made it more difficult to realize, at least in the short term. Nevertheless, the creation of a new council suggests that Benedict has not thrown in the towel.

tIf Tornielli is correct in suggesting that Fisichella will be the first president of the new council, it amounts to a significant papal vote of confidence in one of his more embattled aides.

tFisichella is a well-known figure on the Italian scene, having served as Rector of the Lateran University and as chaplain to the Italian parliament. A philosopher by training, he and Ratzinger were primary advisors to John Paul II for his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. In 2008, Benedict named Fisichella as President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, the Vatican?s primary pro-life body of scholars and activists.

tHis role in Italian politics, his media savvy, and his background in philosophy rather than theology have all given Fisichella a profile as someone who knows how to talk to the secular world, making him a logical candidate to head a council dedicated to re-evangelizing the West.

tFisichella is also an ambivalent figure, however, for some of the church?s most staunchly pro-life forces, as a result of his role in a 2009 controversy from Brazil involving an abortion for a nine-year-old girl. The girl had become pregnant after reportedly being raped by her stepfather, and her mother arranged for an abortion. Archbishop Jose Cardoso Sobrinho of Olinda and Recife, upon learning of the case, announced that the mother, the doctor, and others involved in the abortion were excommunicated.

tSobrinho?s position aroused widespread protest in Brazil and around the world, but drew swift backing from Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, prefect of the Vatican?s Congregation for Bishops. Fisichella, however, then penned a front-page essay in *L?Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, that appeared to criticize Sobrinho.
t
?Before giving thought to excommunication, it was necessary and urgent to safeguard the innocent life of this girl, and return her to a level of humanity of which we, men of the church, should be expert heralds and teachers,? Fisichella wrote.

What is needed now, he added, ?is the sign of a testimony of closeness with the one suffering, an act of mercy that, even while firmly maintaining the principle, is able to look beyond the juridical sphere.?

That article brought protests both from bishops in Brazil and from pro-life activists all over the world, resulting in a July 10 ?clarification? from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith indicating that church teaching on abortion has not changed and will not change.

Within the Pontifical Academy for Life, a group of members led by Belgian Monsignor Michel Schooyans wrote a lengthy letter calling for Fisichella?s removal, arguing that he had falsely invoked the concept of ?compassion? to justify actions contrary to Christian morality. Nonetheless, Fisichella has remained on the job.

If he indeed becomes the head of the new pontifical council, that would put Fisichella in line to become a cardinal, and, at least in theory, potentially a candidate to be the next pope ? suggesting that his stock has not

been overly damaged by the Brazilian affair.

?Pontifical Councils? are a largely post-Second Vatican Council (1962-65) addition to Vatican structures, and are generally considered less powerful than the older ?Congregations,? which exercise decision-making authority in the name of the pope in some specific area. Councils, on the other hand, are more akin to think tanks set up to promote a good cause: the family, Christian unity, justice and peace, and so on.

Because most pontifical councils are focused on the outside world rather than internal church politics, however, they can often have an important impact in shaping public perceptions of the Catholic church.

Source URL (retrieved on *10/09/2015 - 16:06*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/report-pope-launch-pontifical-council-new-evangelization