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Seven days that shook the Vatican

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

It?s customary for the Vatican to empty its pipeline of pending business before the pope heads for his annual summer retreat in Castel Gandolfo, which Benedict will do after his general audience next Wednesday. In itself, that usually makes for a flurry of news in late June, which was turbo-charged this year by dramatic events breaking in on the Vatican from the outside.

Consider the torrent of big-ticket Vatican stories during the past week:

- A spectacular series of police raids against the Catholic church in Belgium as part of a sex abuse probe, including drilling into the tombs of deceased archbishops in search of hidden documents, which set off a barbed diplomatic war of words between Brussels and Rome.
- An almost surreal kiss-and-make-up session between two cardinals, Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, and Angelo Sodano, dean of the College of Cardinals and the former Secretary of State under Pope John Paul II. The meeting came after Schönborn had accused Sodano in April of blocking action on an especially explosive Austrian chapter of the sex abuse crisis.
- A decision by the Supreme Court in the United States to allow a sex abuse lawsuit against the Vatican in Oregon to proceed, and the filing of a new lawsuit against the Vatican (as well as the Salesian order) in Los Angeles just two days later.
- Important personnel moves in the Vatican, including the appointments of Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Quebec to head the ultra-powerful Congregation for Bishops, and Bishop Kurt Koch of Basel, Switzerland, to replace Cardinal Walter Kasper as the Vatican?s top ecumenical official. In general, the appointments signal the triumph of theologians over diplomats in the Vatican, ensuring that men who share Benedict XVI?s spiritual and theological outlook are now firmly in charge.
- The creation of a brand new Vatican department, the ?Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization,? whose mission is to try to reawaken the faith in the West, above all in Europe, with Italian Archbishop Rino Fisichella named as the council?s first president.
- Struggles to contain the fallout from a financial scandal swirling around the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, formerly known as ?Propaganda Fidei,? with the Vatican first admitting ?errors of judgment? and then twenty-four hours later insisting that wasn?t supposed to be taken as a reference to Sepe personally.
- A hearing of the European Court of Human Rights to determine whether the display of crucifixes in Italian public school classrooms violates European protections of human rights and freedom of conscience.

I?m in Rome, and I filed stories on most of those developments (and more, including interviews with the three American archbishops who received the pallium, the symbol of their office, on June 29), which can be found on the *NCR* web site. (See Friday Vatican potpourri [1] and the links at the end of this column.) We?re still waiting for one more shoe to drop, which is that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is expected to issue a set of revisions to the 2001 *motu proprio* governing sex abuse cases, *Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela*, sometime in the near future.

Faced with such a deluge of news, the obvious temptation is to miss the forest for the trees. Here, I?d like to step back from the details and ponder the question, ?What does it all mean?? There are, of course, many possible answers, including the Homer Simpson version of Occam?s razor: ?Why does it have to mean anything? Maybe it?s just a bunch of stuff that happened.?

Yet I?m inclined to think the past week does mean something, and here?s my first-blush stab at expressing it: Collectively, I think these events both symbolize and advance the collapse of Catholicism as a culture-shaping majority in the West. When the dust settles, policy-makers in the church, particularly in the Vatican, will be ever more committed to what social theorists call ?identity politics,? a traditional defense mechanism relied upon by minorities when facing what they perceive as a hostile cultural majority.

While there are an almost infinite number of ways of defining a ?minority,? one widely invoked model says it has four characteristics:

- Suffering discrimination and subordination
- Physical and/or cultural traits that set them apart, and which are disapproved by the dominant group
- A shared sense of collective identity and common burdens
- Socially shared rules about who belongs and who does not

A growing swath of Catholics in the West, particularly in the church?s leadership class, believes that all these markers now apply to the Catholic church, and the events of the past week will strongly reinforce those impressions.

Taken together, the police raids in Belgium, the refusal by the Supreme Court in the United States to block a sex abuse lawsuit against the Vatican, and the European Court of Human Rights challenge to display of Catholic symbols in Italy all suggest that the final pillars of deference by civil authorities to the Catholic church are crumbling. That?s a long-term historical process accelerated by the sexual abuse crisis, as well as by other scandals and PR meltdowns (such as the financial controversy currently surrounding Propaganda Fidei and its former prefect, Naples Cardinal Crescenzio Sepe.)

Even if Italy prevails in the crucifix case, it will not be on the basis of some privileged legal status for Catholicism, but because of nationalist resentments in many European nations over perceived EU hegemony. Likewise, if the Vatican succeeds in getting the sex abuse lawsuits dismissed in the States, it won?t be because American courts regard the Catholic church as ?untouchable,? but because of technical arguments about the

implications of national sovereignty.

Of course, some observers -- and not just religion?s cultured despisers, but many Catholics themselves -- welcome all this, seeing it as a long-overdue dose of humility and accountability. On the other hand, a growing band of Catholic opinion, certainly reflected in the Vatican, believes that a ?tipping point? has been reached in the West, in which secular neutrality toward the church, especially in Europe, has shaded off into hostility and, sometimes, outright persecution.

Some blame a rising tide of neo-paganism in the West for the church?s woes, while others say church leaders, and especially the Vatican, have no one to blame but themselves. Whichever view one adopts, the empirical result is the same: Catholicism no longer calls the cultural tune. Benedict?s decision to launch an entire department in the Vatican dedicated to treating the West as ?mission territory? amounts to a clear acknowledgment of the point.

Facing that reality, Catholicism, both at the leadership level and in important circles at the grass roots, is reacting as social theorists would likely predict, with a strategy that other embattled minority groups -- from the Amish to Orthodox Judaism, from the Gay Pride movement to the Nation of Islam -- have often employed: Emphasizing its unique markers of identity, in order to defend itself against assimilation to the majority.

Benedict?s curial appointments this week move in that direction.

All three new Vatican heavyweights -- Ouellet, Koch, and Fisichella -- share Benedict?s commitment to a ?hermeneutic of continuity? in reading the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), stressing that it did not repeal earlier layers of Catholic teaching and tradition. All three are committed to recovering a ?thick? sense of Catholic identity, encoded in traditional markers of Catholic thought, speech and practice -- Mass in Latin, or in vernacular translations closer to Latin; an ecclesiology which emphasizes the unique status of the Catholic church vis-à-vis other Christian denominations and other religions; and in general, a strong sense of Catholic distinctiveness.

Strikingly, neither the Secretariat of State nor the Congregation for Bishops, traditionally considered two of the three most powerful offices in the Vatican (alongside the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), are now led by men who come out of the Vatican?s diplomatic corps. Instead, management has been entrusted to theological protégés of the pope, who accent the church?s spiritual and doctrinal identity rather than *Realpolitik*.

Critics sometimes regard all this as a ?rolling back of the clock,? meaning nostalgia for the church before the reforms of Vatican II. Seen through a sociological lens, however, it looks more like Catholicism adjusting to its post-modern minority status -- you can debate the cure, but the diagnosis, at least, seems solidly in touch with reality.

To be sure, Benedict XVI?s ambition is not merely that the church in the West will be a minority, but a ?creative minority,? a term he borrows from Arnold Toynbee. The idea is that when great civilizations enter a crisis, they either decay or are renewed from within by ?creative minorities? who offer a compelling vision of the future.

The $64,000 question, therefore, is whether Benedict?s version of a ?politics of identity? is the right way to unleash the creativity in Catholicism that will allow it to play a transformative role in the cultural movements of the future. One thing?s for sure: projecting a robust sense of Catholic identity seems poised to be the guiding principle in Rome for some time to come.

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