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

Secularism, Africa and characters in Rome

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 20, 2010 All Things Catholic

During the Cold War, both sides saw the so-called "Third World" as a battleground for hearts and minds. More and more, the same thing is true in today's ideological struggles over secularism, and this summer has brought some important changes to the strategic map:

- On July 15, Argentina became the first nation outside Europe and North America to approve same-sex marriage.
- In two dramatic recent rulings, the Mexican Supreme Court has upheld marriage and adoption rights for homosexuals in Mexico City.
- Kenyans overwhelmingly approved a new constitution in early August despite objections that it opens the door to liberalized abortion.

For cultural conservatives who believe all this is fueled by Western campaigns to export radical secularism around the planet, Africa usually looms as the great hope for drawing a line in the sand. The latest effort to shore up the African front came during the July 26-August 2 plenary assembly of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), which brings together the Catholic bishops of Africa, and which was held this year in Accra, Ghana.

At that event, three Catholic writers and activists had the chance to address the African bishops, all associated with a fairly hawkish line vis-à-vis faith and culture. How successful such thinkers are in framing the African agenda may have a great deal to say about how Catholicism engages both the promise and perils of secularism in the 21st century.

First up was French Msgr. Tony Anatrella, who denounced what he regards as a toxic Western "gender theory," contrasting it with Pope Benedict XVI's social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. A social psychiatrist who teaches in Paris, Anatrella is a consultor to the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care as well as a member of an International Commission on Medjugorje for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Anatrella briefly became a cause célèbre in 2005, when he wrote an official commentary for the Vatican newspaper asserting that homosexuality represents a "problem in psychic organization" and that gay men should not become priests even if they remain celibate.

In his speech to the African bishops, Anatrella urged them to resist a Western ideology of "gender theory," which, he charged, has been elaborated by radical European (mainly French) intellectuals, and is currently being spread around the world "by the U.N. agencies, NGOs, the European Parliament of Strasburg and the Commission of Brussels." Gender theory, Anatrella said, posits that "human nature does not exist because the human being is merely the result of culture," and that "masculinity and femininity are mere social inventions."

Those ideas, he said, amount to "intellectual viruses" and "anthropological heresies" with dangerous consequences. Here's how Anatrella laid it out for the African bishops:

"This ideology of gender, produced by the human sciences, is a new form of idealism which, like Marxism, is contrary to human interests. ? It suggests that sexual identity is independent of biological facts, treating biological and psychological sexuality as nothing more than a social construct and a power game between men and women. The war between the sexes thus replaces class struggle. ? Motherhood is considered a handicap and an injustice, since only women carry children. It is therefore necessary to liberate women from maternity, which explains the multiplication of campaigns in favor of contraception and abortion."

What all this amounts to, Anatrella said, is a "moral and anthropological deregulation" analogous to the market deregulation associated with liberal capitalism. He warned that a radically post-modern, post-Christian moral vision is often bundled with the process of globalization, and called on the African bishops to be on guard.

Marguerite Peeters, an American citizen who lives in Brussels, is author of *The Globalization of the Western Cultural Revolution*, which decries Western efforts to foist a post-modern secularist ideology on the rest of the world. Her topic in Accra was "recent Western ideologies and lifestyles contrary to the values and virtues of Christianity."

Peeters' text wasn't immediately available, but in an essay on the "new global ethic" that amounts to her manifesto, Peeters argues that secularism is more invidious than Communism because it does not "bring about a new political regime." Instead, it achieves "radical changes of mentality and behavior within institutions, inside enterprises, schools, universities, hospitals, cultures, governments, families -- inside the church."

"The institutional façade remains standing, while foreigners already occupy the rooms," she writes. "The enemy must be sought within -- inside is the new battleground."

Peeters warns that a sweeping "deconstruction of man and nature" has been packaged in a benign-sounding "new global ethic," which Catholics sometimes confuse with the social doctrine of the church. In fact, however, it seeks to install a "new hierarchy of values," with personal well-being placed above the sacredness of life, women's rights above motherhood, the individual above legitimate authority, the right to choose above the moral law, and, ultimately, the human person above God.

Like Anatrella, Peeters charges that this agenda is being propagated through the United Nations and various Western NGOs, which, she said, are funded and sustained by ideological special interests.

Finally, the bishops heard from Daniele Sauvage of the Africa Family Life Federation. Sauvage is a native of Mauritius, and her federation represents 29 groups in 20 African countries which promote traditional Catholic approaches to family life such as Natural Family Planning.

Over the years, Sauvage too has warned against Western concepts such as "reproductive health" and "gender ideology" which, she argues, amount to "virulent ideological poisons" being "imposed" upon the African continent by international organizations and special interest groups. To fight that threat, she urged the African bishops to invest in programs of formation for children, couples and families, and to support the development of pro-life movements and institutes.

Many African bishops seem sympathetic to such arguments.

During the October 2009 Synod for Africa, for example, Archbishop Joseph Tlhagale of Johannesburg, president of the South African bishops' conference, asserted that Africa is "under heavy strain from liberalism, secularism and from lobbyists who squat at the United Nations," representing "a second wave of colonization, both subtle and ruthless at the same time." Archbishop Charles Palmer-Buckle of Accra was equally emphatic in an *NCR* interview, asserting that there's a "deliberate campaign" to push Africa towards acceptance of practices

such as abortion and homosexuality, stemming from what he called "a particular lobby that sees African values as a danger to the 'new global ethic' propounded by the U.N., by the World Bank, by the IMF, and even by the European Union."

A SECAM spokesperson told me this week that Anatrella, Peeters and Sauvage had been recommended as speakers by several of the bishops, and that their presentations were "well appreciated."

"The bishops of Africa are really concerned about the issues they raised," said Ben Assorow, Director of Communications for SECAM.

If nothing else, all this may suggest that Catholic doves, meaning thinkers and activists in the church interested in seeking détente with secularism, might do well to reach out to the Africans. At the moment, their voices don't seem to have the same echo as the hawks.

* * *

I reached Sauvage by phone on Thursday to discuss the SECAM assembly and perceived Western efforts to impose a secular ethic on Africa. A descendant of 18th century French settlers in Mauritius, Sauvage is a married mother of three children who recently welcomed her first grand-child. Her views are interesting not merely because she has an opportunity to shape the thinking of Africa's bishops, but as a mirror into Catholic pro-life activism in Africa.

What was your message to the bishops?

I spoke about what we are experiencing in our different associations, and in many ways it's good news. There's a very great enthusiasm for the church's message on love and marriage. That's very special, because I know it's not everywhere that couples and young people are eager to hear the church's message and to live in accord with God's plan. There are also lots of priests enthusiastic to work with us. We're constantly getting requests to go out and teach.

Is this because the church's message is consistent with traditional African values?

Yes, I think so. Africans are deeply rooted in their families and in the importance of the family. Women are happy to be women and men are happy to be men, so the idea of 'complementarity' comes naturally for them. Africans regard children as a gift. All of that means they generally welcome what the church has to say.

Do you believe there's an effort to impose Western-style secularism upon Africa?

Yes, it's really very sad. Outside groups often do not respect the dignity of Africans or their traditions. The mentality of 'safe sex,' the pleasure principle, treating other persons as objects ? all of that is coming from outside Africa and being imposed on us. The massive distribution of condoms by Western governments and NGOs is the most obvious example.

How does this 'pressure' work?

It comes through the government, through the different ministries. For example, none of our associations get a cent from all these international organizations which come to Africa. Their money is given to groups which promote a "gender theory." It's true, of course, that many women in Africa suffer from second-class citizenship, but instead of educating men to recognize the dignity of women, these groups promote the view that in order for women to be equal, they have to be 'liberated' from having children. It's important to be aware of this pressure, because sometimes we just go through the motions and accept these ideologies without understanding what is

being done to us.

Do you believe the bishops are committed to resisting the pressure?

Yes, I think they are, but the big problem is resources. Organizations that help the family need money, but these international donors only give funds to what they want to support. If they don't believe in an idea, they won't give money to it. The danger is that the agenda will be set not by what's most important, but by what outsiders are willing to pay for.

As you know, the first part of the bishops' meeting in Ghana was about self-reliance, and it's a big concern. Take the issue of ecology. We're all concerned about climate change and so on, and it would be easy for the bishops to get money for programs on those issues. But what about human ecology and the family values which are so rich in Africa? Who wants to give money for that?

Do you believe that as Africa develops economically, it will become more secular?

It's a real possibility, and a threat if we don't emphasize the dignity of the human person. I think, however, there is still hope that Africa will develop differently than Europe. Many Africans are looking at what's happening in Europe, and they have their own thoughts about it. I've met a growing number of Africans who say they don't want their children to study there, because of what they see as an atheistic culture and a lack of respect for the family and the human person. I think it's possible Africans may not go into secularism as in the West, but instead keep the richness they have as regards their faith. Certainly we see strong influences from the West, but there's also a large number of people who are completely resisting it. Even in the education of children, we can see that there's resistance.

* * *

Suggesting another face of Catholic engagement with Africa, my wife Shannon and I attended a dinner in Denver Wednesday night to support the mission of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Zambia. The Oblates are in the middle of raising $2 million to build a new seminary in Lusaka, the country's capital, in order to accommodate their burgeoning number of local vocations. (Although they arrived just a quarter-century ago, the Oblates already have 20 Zambian priests and 80 seminarians.)

In principle, there's nothing that made Wednesday night different from countless similar efforts to sustain various Catholic missions, projects and programs in Africa, except for its venue: The dinner took place in Denver's Boettcher Mansion, residence of the Governor of Colorado, and was hosted by Gov. Bill Ritter and his wife Jeannie, themselves former Oblate lay missionaries in Zambia.

Ritter, a Democrat, won the governor's job in 2006 and opted not to run for reelection this year. Until recently, he was one of two American governors with a background as a former Catholic lay missionary: Gov. Tim Kane of Virginia, also a Democrat, did missionary work in Honduras under the aegis of the Jesuits. (After his term ended earlier this year, Kane became the chairman of the Democratic National Committee).

Born in Denver, Ritter attended an Oblate junior seminary in Texas as a young man and remained friends with the order. After he served as a deputy district attorney in Denver in the 1980s, he and his wife were ready to try something else. They called an old friend in the Oblates, Fr. Bill Morell, to volunteer to serve in the order's Zambian mission. Morell said that at the time the Oblates didn't have a lay missionary program and were struggling just to keep their priests afloat, but as fate (or providence) would have it, he had opened a letter from a Zambian bishop asking for a lay Catholic couple to serve in his diocese just moments before Ritter called.

From 1987 to 2000, the Ritters ran a food distribution and nutrition education center in the isolated Western

province of Zambia, trying to help chronically undernourished and malnourished locals develop the capacity to feed themselves and their children. They were certainly "all in" in terms of personal commitment; Jeannie Ritter explained that she brought one of their four children to Zambia, gave birth to a second there, and conceived a third. (Laughingly, she said the Oblates in Zambia joked that somebody needed to get this couple a TV, so they'd have something else to do with their time!)

As it happens, Jeannie Ritter was not a Catholic when she and the future governor headed off to Zambia. She was converted, she said, in part by the experience of serving the poorest of the poor in the name of the church, and in part by the witness of the Oblate priests she came to think of as members of her own family.

Political couples are, of course, adept at summoning fake enthusiasm, but watching the governor and his wife light up telling stories about Zambia, it seemed obvious the experience had left an impression. (That's all the more credible given that Ritter isn't running for anything at the moment.) The moral of the story is that when the church calls Catholics to serve, the payoff isn't just for the beneficiaries of the mission ? in this case, the impoverished Zambians who are better fed because of the Ritters and the legacy they left behind. It also changes the missionaries themselves, giving them a different sense of the world and their place in it.

How that alters the trajectory of their lives is anybody's guess, but every now and then it may just land them in a governor's mansion.

Information on the Oblates' seminary project in Zambia can be found here: Help Us Help Others [1].

* * *

The big story in Rome this week was the death on Tuesday of Francesco Cossiga, a former president of Italy and a titan of the European political scene for the entire post-war period. Politically he was a man of contradictions, the most pro-Atlantic figure in the old Christian Democrats and yet also the architect of bringing the first ex-Communist to power in Italy. Irascible and unpredictable, he was known as the "pickaxe" for his legendary verbal eruptions.

Cossiga was an active Catholic, a believer who prayed daily and took regular pilgrimages to Assisi. He defined himself as "a liberal Catholic," by which he meant a Catholic reconciled with modern democracy and the separation of powers ? as the Italians put it, "a free church in a free state."

On Tuesday night, the Vatican released a statement saying that Pope Benedict XVI shared the grief of Cossiga's family, calling him "an authoritative protagonist of Italian national life and a man of faith." The Cardinal Secretary of State, Tarcisio Bertone, penned a brief reflection in which he recalled his own contacts with Cossiga over the years, as well as the many "evenings of rich philosophical and theological conversation" which Cossiga shared with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.

Bertone said that in thinking about his "illustrious and dear friend" the other night, Benedict pointed to three objectives which Cossiga tenaciously pushed the church to accomplish over the years: the proclamation of St. Thomas More as the patron of Catholic politicians, the rehabilitation of the 19th century Italian reformer Antonio Rosmini, and the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman. Two of the three have already happened, and Benedict is set to beatify Newman next month in Birmingham, England.

L'Osservatore Romano, the official Vatican newspaper, reprinted a 2009 essay penned by Cossiga and devoted to the impact of Newman on the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). It may seem odd that an Italian politician would be devoted to a 19th century English theologian and apologist, but for Cossiga's kind of "liberal Catholic," Newman, like Rosmini, has always been a patron saint.

In his essay, Cossiga argues that Newman helped set the stage for Vatican II in five important areas:

- Freedom of conscience and religion, which paved the way to accept the separation of church and state;
- The role of the laity;
- Recovery of the Bible and the Fathers of the church;
- The idea of development in Catholic doctrine, which Cossiga defined as an "intellectual miracle";
- Ecumenism.

Perhaps the most striking element of Cossiga's essay is a quotation he reproduced from the French Catholic philosopher Jean Guitton, who wrote the following in L'Osservatore Romano in 1964, as Vatican II was nearing its close:

"Great geniuses are prophets who always illuminate great events, and those events, in turn, throw a retrospective light upon the great geniuses which gives them a prophetic character. It's like the rapport that runs between Isaiah and the Passion of Christ, reciprocally illuminating: thus Newman sheds light on the Council with his presence, and in turn the Council justifies Newman."

To round out the picture, Cossiga's version of liberal Catholicism was certainly not that of today's left-wing church reform crowd.

In 2008, he came out swinging against Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the distinguished Jesuit former archbishop of Milan, after publication of Martini's book *Siamo tutti sulla stessa barca* ("We're All in the Same Boat"), co-written with Fr. Luigi Verzè, a well-known progressive Italian priest. The book called for greater openness to divorced and remarried Catholics and other measures Cossiga judged to be excessively lax.

As ever, the pickaxe did not pull his punches. After declaring he was now sorry that as prime minister (in keeping with protocol at the time) he had signed off on Martini's appointment to Milan in 1979, Cossiga acidly said the only thing missing in the cardinal's book was "a defense of pedophilia as a tradition of Hellenism."

Cossiga also ripped Cardinal Karl Lehmann of Germany and Cardinal Diogini Tettamanzi, Martini's successor in Milan, of whose leadership Cossiga said that "before long, we'll see naked women dancing in the cathedral." He likewise attacked lay theologian Vito Mancuso, who famously presents his liberal positions as expressions of an "adult faith."

"I'm an infant and in communion with the church," Cossiga said in that 2008 interview, "so I don't agree."

All this, I suppose, belongs in the "only in Italy" file, where former heads of state spend their time poring over the latest theological titles and taking potshots at prelates who aren't their cup of tea.

* * *

Speaking of enduring characters on the Roman scene, Cardinal Renato Martino, former president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, himself has long had a "pickaxe"-esque willingness to speak his mind. Before, during and after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Martino was the source of the strongest Vatican criticism -- recall, for example, his charge that U.S. troops treated the captured Saddam Hussein "like a cow."

Martino was at it again this week, commenting on the resignation of Archbishop Gerardo Pierro of Salerno, currently under investigation by civil prosecutors for his role in a scheme centering on a summer home for disadvantaged children recently converted into a luxury hotel. Supposedly, Pierro helped secure more than $3 million in public funding to spruce up the home, and then turned it into a high-end property in collaboration

with a private developer. It's not the first time Pierro has been in hot water; back in 2002 he was investigated for allegedly misusing funds donated for renovation of the diocesan seminary, though in that case prosecutors decided he had acted "in good faith."

Martino, who grew up in Salerno and still spends his summer vacation there, basically told reporters it's high time that Pierro was replaced. Martino said the new bishop will need to "change everything," a clear vote of no confidence in Pierro's tenure.

On other matters, Martino, now 77, announced that he intends to spend the next year denouncing conditions in Italian prisons, where, he charged, "the human rights of inmates are not respected."

"So-called civil society is completely disinterested in this problem, and I want to shout my disgust strongly," Martino said.

When a journalist pointed out that the cause of prison conditions is typically taken up only by the ferociously anti-clerical Radical Party, Martino didn't back down: "When the cause is good, I don't care about its political affiliation," he said.

Martino added that he learned the "vocation of denouncing" in high school, when he read Alessandro Manzoni's famous novel *i Promessi Sposi* ("The Betrothed") and was enchanted by the character of Fra Cristoforo. For those who haven't read the book, Cristoforo is the fiery-tempered son of a middle class businessman, who gets into a duel with a nobleman and ends up killing him. He takes refuge in a Capuchin friary, becomes a priest, and emerges as a relentless champion of the downtrodden. Martino said he loved the character so much that when he became a Franciscan tertiary as a young man, he took the name Ludovico, which was Cristoforo's name before his entry into the Capuchins.

A reporter asked Martino if, in the church of today, there are more Cristoforos or Don Abbondios ? the latter being another character in Manzoni's novel, a cowardly and lazy cleric who steers clear of anything resembling effort.

Martino's blunt answer: "There aren't nearly enough Cristoforos."

* * *

Finally, on the subject of longtime figures in Rome passing from the scene, it's important to note the Aug. 16 death of Professor Nicola Cabibbo, the veteran president of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and a professor of particle physics at Rome's La Sapienza University.

Cabibbo was a gentle, unassuming presence, but he left an important legacy at the Academy of Sciences, the 78-member panel of researchers and specialists from around the world (many non-Catholic and even non-believing) which advises the pope on scientific matters. It's descended from the "Academy of the Lynxes," founded in 1603, making it the oldest scientific academy in the world.

Cabibbo devoted his life to trying to overcome the breach between the church and science, insisting relentlessly that when they're properly understood, faith and science are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.

Here's an interview I did with Cabibbo back in 2005, where he gently disagreed with an op/ed piece by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna in the New York Times that seemed to endorse the "intelligent design" movement: Interview with Professor Nicola Cabibbo [2].

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time a All Things Catholic column is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [3]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add All Things Catholic to your list.

Source URL (retrieved on *04/24/2014 - 20:08*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/secularism-africa-and-characters-rome

Links:
[1] http://www.oblatesusa.org/HelpUs.aspx?path=root/momi/HelpUs/zambia&section=charitablegifts
[2] http://www.natcath.org/mainpage/specialdocuments/cabibbo.htm
[3] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup