

Two weeks' worth of hope

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 1, 2010 All Things Catholic

When I'm on the lecture circuit, one of the most common questions I get is this: "Where do you see hope in the church?" Implicit, of course, is the assumption that hope is hard to find. (Usually, also implicit is that by "church" the questioner actually means "hierarchy," but that's another conversation.)

The premise is understandable, because the case for despair is often depressingly easy to make. Yet I also can't help feeling that one has to be almost deliberately blind not to see signs of hope everywhere, if you but look around.

The last two weeks have cemented that impression. Over that span, I was in the U.K. to cover the papal trip, and then on the road for a speaking gig at the University of Portland in Oregon, which is sponsored by the Congregation of the Holy Cross; in Minnesota, leading a retreat for the Board of Overseers of St. John's School of Theology/Seminary; and in Toronto, delivering the Kelly Lecture at the University of St. Michael's College, in partnership with the Catholic media network "Salt and Light."

That's probably as close to a random sampling of Catholic life in the English-speaking world as it's possible to come in one two-week span -- and it was almost impossible to dip in and out of those milieus without feeling basically optimistic about Catholic fortunes.

Benedict XVI's Sept. 16-19 trip to Scotland and England was stirring, and not merely because it was one of those rare instances in which what the pope pitched was more or less what people actually caught. (In this case, the pitch was a forceful argument about the role of religion in public life.) The trip also gave scores of ordinary Catholics the chance to talk about their faith before a national audience, and it showcased one of the more imaginative recent efforts to address the church's communications problem: "Catholic Voices," a project founded by a couple of prominent laity, completely independently of the bishops' conference, whose mission was to prepare twenty- and thirty-something Catholics to tackle hot-button issues in a media setting and to explain what Catholicism means to them. I caught several of them doing their thing on the BBC, Sky News, and other outlets during the four-day trip, and they dazzled.

While I was at the University of Portland, I joined the local Holy Cross community for a simple but moving evening liturgy in which one of their brothers was anointed for an upcoming operation, with several family members alongside. Some 30 Holy Cross priests and brothers live on campus, most of them working or teaching at the university. In an era when a student can spend four years on some Catholic colleges and almost never see someone in a Roman collar, that's a remarkable commitment of personnel, and it's reflected in a palpable Catholic ethos on campus.

My appearance was sponsored by the Garaventa Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Culture, launched in 2004 to explore the intersection between faith and American public life and to stimulate reflection on what it means to be a Catholic institution. It's one of countless examples across the country of a new intentionality about Catholic identity in higher education, an acknowledgement that it can't simply be taken for granted.

In Minnesota, I found myself among a mix of talented and articulate Catholics from a variety of walks of life -- business, law, politics, the academy -- all of whom seemed hungry to contribute to St. John's School of Theology/Seminary and the Benedictine legacy it carries. We had a day-long conversation about the trends shaping Catholicism I outlined in my book *The Future Church*, and how they might inform the choices the School of Theology makes about how to deploy its resources.

China was a particular point of emphasis, given that St. John's already has links there. So was the possibility of drawing on the spirit of moderation and hospitality in Benedictine spirituality to foster space for conversation, as an antidote to polarization and tribalism in the church.

In Toronto, I spoke at the University of St. Michael's College before a standing room only crowd of more than 500 people, including Catholics from the left, right and center, all of whom seemed hungry to have a rational conversation, as well as to share a laugh or two and to enjoy one another's company. It was a great reminder that, beyond theological controversy and political debate, Catholicism at a human level is also a hell of a lot of fun.

The next morning I spoke to a gathering of local Catholic businesspeople convened by Toronto's Archbishop Thomas Collins, and I was struck by how keenly interested these high achievers seemed in what's happening in the church and how they might be able to help, if only someone asks.

(By the way, let me make my bones as a church insider: Before my lecture Tuesday night I had dinner with a small group that included the archbishop, and I can report that when having a cocktail, he honest to God orders a "Tom Collins.")

I spent much of Wednesday at the Toronto headquarters of Salt and Light, taping segments for what felt like every program in their entire fall line-up. One impressive thing about Salt and Light is that they don't play just to one side of the street, or to one constituency. They strive to speak to and about the whole church, including all of its various tribes and slices of life. In an age in which media outlets usually make their bread and butter by reinforcing ideological biases, Salt and Light still believes in common ground.

I'll concede that maybe these venues aren't fully representative of the whole Catholic scene, and perhaps I'm overly inclined to what a friend calls a "hermeneutic of charity," meaning trying to see everything in a positive light. For sure, a string of feel-good experiences can't magically dissolve the very real problems facing the church, both those welling up from within and those crashing in from the outside.

Still, on the heels of the last two weeks, I would say just one thing to any Catholic who thinks hope is hard to find: You need to get out more often.

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