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Thinking straight about Israel, the Jews and the Archbishop

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 27, 2010 All Things Catholic

***Editor's Note**: All Things Catholic is being posted early this week because of the timeliness of the subject. For background, look to John Allen's full coverage of the the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, located here[1].*

We in the media have a genius for grabbing a small but sensational piece of a bigger picture and banging it like a cheap drum, which usually produces a fun-house mirror view of reality: Relatively small things seem huge, while bigger and more significant things shrink into near invisibility.

To take the most obvious recent example, whatever the big picture is for Islam in America, it certainly isn?t an epidemic of Qur?an burnings. Yet the mere threat of such an event from a Florida pastor whose entire congregation could fit into a phone booth held the world hostage for a month thanks to saturation ?will he or won?t he?? coverage.

In some ways, reaction to the close of the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East is following the same script.

The synod produced 44 propositions for Pope Benedict XVI and a 5,000-word final message, both of which contain a bewildering array of insights and ideas for solidifying the Christian presence in the Middle East and contributing to its great dream -- which is that the tiny Christian minority, hanging on by the skin of its teeth, can somehow catalyze a democratic revolution in the region, building societies based on religious freedom and equality before the law.

Yet the only storyline that?s had any traction in the American press is Israeli and Jewish backlash to a comment by one synod participant in the closing press conference on Saturday.

In a nutshell, Greek Melkite Archbishop Cyrille Bustros, who heads the Eparchy of Newton, Massachusetts, told reporters that Christ ?abolished? the notion of a ?Promised Land? for Jews, because the Kingdom of God is for all. (Bustros was speaking in French and used the word *abolie*, while the English translation given over the headphones was ?nullified,? which is the term that appeared in many English-language reports.)

While there may have been a few other aspects of the synod which didn?t go down well in Israeli and Jewish circles, this was the shot heard ?round the world.

Theologically, Bustros? comments seemed to revive what the late Cardinal Avery Dulles called ?crude supersessionism? -- meaning that the coming of Christ rendered Judaism irrelevant. That position has been widely held to have been rejected by the Second Vatican Council and subsequent papal teaching, such as a November 1980 speech by John Paul II to a delegation of Jews in Germany in which the late pope referred to ?the Old Covenant, never revoked by God.?

Politically, many Israelis took Bustros? remarks to suggest a wholesale rejection of the legitimacy of Israel?s identity as a Jewish state.

Reaction has been swift and severe.

Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon complained that the synod had turned into ?a forum for political attacks on Israel in the best history of Arab propaganda.? The Anti-Defamation League in the United States claimed that Bustros had essentially said that ?Judaism should no longer exist,? and that it?s ?the worst kind of anti-Judaism, bordering on anti-Semitism.?

The *Jerusalem Post* editorially called upon Pope Benedict to repudiate Bustros.

?Pope Benedict XVI still has a chance to distance himself from the synod?s declarations, and make it clear that Bustros? comments deviate from Church teaching,? the *Post* editorial said. ?That is the right and necessary thing for the pope to do -- not just for Jewish-Catholic relations, but also for the sake of the Middle East?s persecuted Christian minority.?

Without trying to settle the debate over what Bustros said, or whether the pope needs to address it, there are four important bits of context to bear in mind if we?re going to think straight about what?s really at issue.

John Allen has been in Rome covering the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East for the past 2 weeks. Read all of Allen's reports, and *NCR*'s other coverage of the Synod, here: **Index of stories from the Synod [1].**

Not ?the Vatican?

Some reports billed the contretemps as a new chapter in tensions between ?the Vatican? and Israel and/or Judaism -- analogous to earlier controversies over Pope Benedict?s speeches at Auschwitz and Yad Vashem, the Latin liturgy and its Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews, and the lifting of the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying traditionalist bishop.

Those comparisons are misleading, however, because they involve official papal speeches and policy decisions while this case pivots on a comment from a single Eastern Catholic bishop.

We have been down this road before and should know better: More times than anyone can count, a Vatican official or a bishop who happens to be in Rome says something careless and it gets billed as a ?Vatican statement.? Spokespersons for the Vatican are then compelled to disown it, insisting that it was merely a ?personal opinion.?

That?s the case again this time, as Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, told reporters that the only official statements of the synod are contained in its final message and in the propositions. Lombardi?s clear implication was that Bustros was speaking only for himself.

I realize that there?s a tendency to leap to Machiavellian assumptions about everything that happens in the Vatican -- that everything is somehow scripted from on high and no official or visiting prelate would dare speak out without explicit papal approval.

In truth, however, things are far more loosey-goosey. There?s no ?war room? in the Holy See where spin doctors meet at 8:00 a.m. to work out the day?s message; there?s no script approval when senior officials or bishops meet the press.

In that sense, the real story here may be more about the Vatican?s continuing PR problem than any change in its theology of Judaism.

In any event, if one wants to know the official teaching of the Catholic church vis-à-vis Judaism, there?s a wealth of material to draw upon -- beginning with the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. A one-off comment from a single prelate does not, and by definition cannot, carry anything like the same weight.

Don?t exaggerate Bustros? importance

Theologically all bishops may be equal, but sociologically and politically some are more equal than others. When the Vatican?s Cardinal Secretary of State says something, he?s presumed to be speaking for the pope; if it?s the Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris, or Milan, or New York, we?re talking about one of the premier movers and shakers in the Catholic world.

Archbishop Bustros, to be honest, is awfully far down that informal food chain. Official Vatican numbers say that his Greek Melkite eparchy counts a grand total of just over 25,000 faithful, scattered across the entire United States.

In reality, there are plenty of individual Catholic parishes in America with larger congregations. Ordinarily, nobody would think that when Fr. Joe at Our Lady of Angels says something outrageous, he?s automatically speaking for the Vatican or the Catholic church writ large. The same sense of perspective ought to apply to Bustros.

Without comparing Bustros to Pastor Terry Jones or his Dove World Outreach Center in Florida, there is nonetheless an apt analogy in terms of media coverage and public perceptions. Just as Jones galvanized far more attention than his actual sociological footprint justifies, there?s a similar danger in overplaying Bustros? standing.

That?s not to say, of course, that Bustros is alone. It?s undeniably true that many Arab Christians have a tendency to be uncritically supportive of the Palestinians, in an effort to prove their Arab credentials. It?s also true that while ?crude supersessionism? may not be official church teaching, it certainly endures in some quarters of Catholic thinking.

Nor is Bustros himself a complete nobody. Observers say he?s theologically well trained, and was among the Eastern bishops tapped to review drafts of the Catechism of the Catholic Church back in the late 1980s and early 90s. Some church-watchers believe he might be in line for an eventual appointment to help lead the Greek Melkite church in his native Lebanon.

Nonetheless, to think that Bustros plays a central role in shaping Catholic teaching or practice over-sells his place in the grand scheme of things.

Trying to be inclusive

Context is usually the first casualty of any controversy and in some ways that?s the case this time around too. Looking at the entirety of what Bustros said last Saturday, the thrust of his remarks was that Christians ought to be concerned with everybody -- in the case of the Middle East, both Israelis and Palestinians.

In other words, Bustros was trying to be inclusive -- even if his language created a very different impression.

Here?s a transcript of the full exchange, as it came through the English language translation provided by the Vatican. The question was asked in Italian and Bustros responded in French.

> **Question**: In the ?Message,? number eight talks about the dialogue with the Jews. That?s where you talk

> about the use and abuse of the Word of God and of faith itself. I would like to know why it?s under relations with the Jews, not relations with everybody -- since normally in the West we hear that it?s not the Jews who use the Scriptures to justify their actions.
>
> **Bustros**: In number eight of the Message, we say that we cannot resort to theological and Biblical assumptions as a tool to justify injustice. We want to say that the promise of God in the Old Testament, relating to the ?promised land? ? as Christians, we?re saying that this promise was essentially nullified [in French, ?abolished?] by the presence of Jesus Christ, who then brought about the Kingdom of God. As Christians, we cannot talk about a ?promised land? for the Jews. We talk about a ?promised land? which is the Kingdom of God. That?s the promised land, which encompasses the entire earth with a message of peace and justice and equality for all the children of God. There is no preferred or privileged people. All men and women from every country have become the ?chosen people.? This is clear for us. We cannot just refer to the ?promised land? to justify the return of the Jews in Israel, and [ignore] the Palestinians who were kicked out of their land. Five million Jews kicked out three or four million Palestinians from their land, and this is not justifiable. There?s no ?chosen people? any longer for Christians. Everybody is the ?chosen people.? What we say is something political. Sacred scripture should not be used to justify the occupation of Palestinian land on the part of the Israelis.

Politically, the payoff is that Christians should not support Israel at the expense of the Palestinians.

No doubt, that point could have been made without using loaded vocabulary about Israel and the ?Promised Land.? Still, it seems that what Bustros wanted to voice was not so much a revisionist interpretation of Christian theology, but rather a *cri de Coeur* about Palestinian suffering. However imbalanced or badly expressed, that?s a different kettle of fish.

Not just the Jews and Israel

Though Bustros failed to make this point explicitly, many observers who followed the two-week long Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, and who are familiar with the rhetoric of the bishops of the region, did not automatically assume that the primary focus of his remarks was Israel or Judaism.

In fact, insiders tended to assume he was talking at least as much about some currents in Evangelical Christianity, which often cite the Old Testament to buttress a strongly pro-Israel political position.

Notably, Bustros does not directly claim that it?s illegitimate for Jews to think in terms of a ?Promised Land,? or to assert a divine warrant for their attachment to the land of Israel.

Instead, what he actually said is that Christians shouldn?t read the Old Testament in a one-sided fashion to support Israeli claims. Knowing the way Catholic and Orthodox bishops of the Middle East think, it?s likely that was directed at least in part to Evangelicals -- whose growing visibility and outspokenness has long rubbed many Arab Christians the wrong way.

To put the point crudely, Bustros probably wasn?t only, or even primarily, grinding an axe against Israel or the Jews. The backdrop to his comments probably wasn?t so much Israeli rhetoric (which doesn?t often pivot on the Bible, but on security considerations and Israel?s status as the region?s lone democracy), but rather that of some -- often U.S.-backed -- Evangelicals.

Final point

Arguably, the most compelling Christian drama in the world today is in the Middle East -- where a flock that?s

shrunk from 20 percent of the population a century ago to maybe five percent today is desperately trying to punch above its weight.

Christians in the Middle East know that their future is democracy or death, so they?re trying to figure out how to be change agents in their societies -- pressing Israel to better integrate its Arab minority and the Islamic countries of the region to make their peace with modernity.

If the Christians of the Middle East can pull that off, the whole world will be in their debt. If they disappear, the most natural human firebreak against a ?clash of civilizations? will be gone.

One hopes, therefore, that when the dust settles over the Bustros episode, the broader discussion fostered by the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East can come into focus. There?s a hugely important story here and it ought not to be permanently waylaid by what amounts to a sideshow.

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