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

The press and the sex abuse crisis of 2010

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 19, 2010 All Things Catholic

*Note: My take on the significance of the election of New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan as the new president of the U.S. bishops can be found here:**Three keys to reading the Dolan win at the USCCB**[1]*

* * *

Under the best of circumstances, the Vatican and the secular media struggle to understand each other, and the first half of 2010 was hardly the best of times. As a new wave of the sexual abuse crisis swept across Europe and raised critical questions about Pope Benedict XVI, Vatican officials accused the press of bias, while news reports and editorial pages blasted the Vatican for dishonesty and denial.

Now that the dust has begun to settle, thoughtful figures on both sides realize the need to take a dispassionate look back. Many in the news business want to know if they got the story right, and at least some in Rome ? not to mention frustrated Catholics elsewhere ? wonder if the Vatican's crisis management strategy, such as it was, backfired.

On Monday, I was in Miami Beach for a gathering of journalists from mainstream secular outlets, sponsored by the "Faith Angle" project of the Washington, D.C.-based Ethics and Public Policy Center. Papal biographer George Weigel and I were asked to lead a discussion of coverage of the crisis, especially its most recent wave.

Among the 20 or so reporters on hand was Laurie Goodstein of the New York Times, whose pieces digging into Benedict's record have been both widely read and controversial. Critics include American Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who called a March 24 story by Goodstein on the Vatican's handling of the case of a Wisconsin priest accused of molesting deaf children "deficient by any reasonable standards of fairness."

The conversation in Miami didn't produce an artificial consensus ? and it wasn't designed to ? but it did have a lot to say about where things stand vis-à-vis the church and the fourth estate.

* * *

Weigel said that in his view, coverage of the American sexual abuse crisis of 2002 largely got the story right, forcing the church to confront a reality that had been "ignored or downplayed" for too long. By way of contrast, he argued, the coverage in 2010, which focused more on the Vatican and the pope, was marred by "errors in reporting and editorial bias."

Weigel laid out what he called seven "flawed assumptions" which, in his view, ran through much of the 2010 coverage.

Assumption One: The "Omni-Competence of the Papacy"

Weigel said the pope is often styled as an absolute monarch, wielding total control over Catholic life. That's not true either in theory or practice, Weigel insisted. In theory, a pope's power is limited by all sorts of things: church tradition, the Code of Canon Law, the sacramental system, even the rules of logic.

In reality, Weigel said, a pope's influence is also limited by factors such as the competence of his aides and his own shrewdness in diagnosing situations and making appointments. He added that the latter point is part of the dynamic of the papacy of Benedict XVI ? this "world-class theological mind," Weigel said, doesn't always seem to have an aptitude for picking subordinates.

Assumption Two: The "World-Class Competence of the Roman Curia"

Weigel said people often succumb to the notion that Vatican officials must be the cream of the Catholic crop, including the notion that they operate "the world's best intelligence service." In reality, Weigel said, the quality of heads of Vatican offices is not notably higher than other systems with which he's familiar ? say, the governments of the United States or the United Kingdom ? and in some cases it's "much lower."

As an illustration, Weigel claimed that Pope John Paul II was four months behind the news when the sexual abuse crisis broke out in the United States during spring 2002, because of the poor quality of information reaching him through Vatican channels. In general, Weigel argued, the small circle of senior Vatican officials who wield real power, probably no more than 20, do not live in the same "24/7 media universe" as the rest of us.

Assumption Three: A "General Hermeneutic of Suspicion"

Outsiders sometimes conclude, Weigel said, that "there is a will to deceive at the highest levels" of the Vatican. In reality, he said, much of what looks like deception is actually bungling ? bred by naiveté, misinformation, or just plain being in over one's head.

A hermeneutic of suspicion, Weigel argued, breeds contorted conspiracy theories, thereby missing "the simplest and truest explanation, which is that these guys were blindsided and scrambled to respond."

Assumption Four: "Institutionalized Hypocrisy"

Many people already don't like the sexual teachings of the Catholic church, Weigel argued, and when violations of that teaching by clergy are not immediately met by draconian penalties, it fuels "gotcha" reporting.

When hypocrisy is presumed to be the root of everything, he said, important bits of context are overlooked. Weigel offered three examples:

?t

- A 1983 revision of the Code of Canon Law was designed to protect priests from arbitrary abuses of power by bishops, but it also made it harder for bishops to discipline abuser priests.
  ?t
- In debates over laicization (popularly known as "defrocking"), some experts caution against it on the grounds that once the church cuts ties with a priest, it loses any ability to monitor and control him.
  ?t
- Weigel also criticized attempts to link the crisis to priestly celibacy, asserting that 50 to 60 percent of the sexual abuse of children occurs in the family ? and is therefore committed by people who have never taken vows of celibacy.
  >

Assumption Five: Sex abuse is "a distinctively Catholic problem, and an institutional Catholic problem."

That may be true of Ireland, Weigel said, but it's not in the United States, where data suggests the incidence of abuse among Catholic priests is no higher than among comparable professional groups such as public school teachers ? even though sex abuse in other environments doesn't draw anything like the same saturation coverage.

In 2010, Weigel argued, "the Catholic church is arguably the safest environment for young people and adolescents in the country," but there remain other "non-safe environments" that will not be exposed so long as public perceptions treat the sexual exploitation of children as a "Catholic problem."

Assumption Six: "A lack of skill in reading church statements and documents"

The inability of some observers to adequately decode Vatican-speak, Weigel said, sometimes leads to "missing the real stories." He cited Pope Benedict's letter to the Catholics of Ireland, which Weigel said, for the first time begins to "dig into real problems of ecclesiastical culture" underneath the crisis. That point was missed, he said, amid sensational but often ill-informed commentary from the likes of Sinead O'Connor.

Assumption Seven: Confusion about who's a reliable source

Weigel complained that in some news coverage, critics of Benedict XVI have been presented as seemingly neutral "experts." He complained, for example, that victims' attorney Jeffrey Anderson is routinely cited without mention of his "direct financial interest" in sex abuse litigation. He also offered the example of Italian Catholic writer and scholar Alberto Melloni, an exponent of a school of interpretation of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) rejected by Benedict XVI. To present Melloni as an objective source, Weigel argued, is a distortion.

More broadly, Weigel warned against relying too much on alleged Roman insiders ? who, he said, are often "low-level munchkins who have no idea what's going on, but are happy to talk over a free cappuccino or a Campari and soda."

* * *

All of that, Weigel argued, illustrates the need for "serious reform in press coverage of the Catholic church."

On the church's side of the ledger, Weigel argued that two chronic problems have to be addressed: 1) What he called "the Vatican's communications debacle," and 2) the lack of "a mechanism for dealing with manifest incompetence, or worse, from bishops." Weigel said that many "serious Catholics," including regular church-goers and big-time donors, have deep reservations these days about the competence of some local bishops. He called the inability to get rid of problem bishops in a timely fashion the church's "single biggest management problem."

Both issues, he said, will have to be faced the next time the cardinals gather in a conclave to elect a pope, because it's not realistic to expect they will be resolved under Benedict XVI.

* * *

In my comments, I raised what has long struck me as the central puzzle about the crisis of 2010: How is it that Pope Benedict XVI, whom insiders regard as the great reformer on the sex abuse issue, somehow became the global symbol of the problem?

I laid out my reading of Benedict's record, which is that then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger underwent a sort of

conversion experience around 2001, when the sex abuse crisis was dumped in his lap by John Paul II. His willingness to face what he once memorably called the "filth in the church" was fueled by studying case files from all over the world, including the testimony of victims, and by listening to his deputies who met with victims. The story as I know it boils down to this: before 2001, Ratzinger was essentially another cardinal in denial; afterwards, he became the leading force inside the Vatican for a more aggressive response.

Measured not against the sweeping programs for reform that some critics of the church have advanced, but against what was realistically possible, Ratzinger moved the ball farther and faster than most people anticipated, often against strong internal opposition.

If that's so, then why did a handful of cases from decades ago, which came to light earlier this year, cause such an earthquake in public perceptions?

In addition to the flawed assumptions flagged by Weigel, I suggested two other factors ? both of which, I think, impeded the Vatican from making a more effective case on the pope's behalf.

First, I argued, the Vatican drew a bad hand, in that the first case to come to light was also the most serious. It involved Peter Hullermann, a German priest who came into the Munich archdiocese for therapy, while facing charges of abuse, when then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was in charge. Hullermann ended up in a Munich parish where he committed other acts of abuse, for which he was eventually convicted criminally.

When the story broke in early March, the immediate response in church circles, both in Munich and in Rome, was to try to insulate Benedict from blame ? insisting that the decision to assign Hullermann to a parish was made at lower levels, without the future pope's knowledge. Whether true or not, that response rang hollow for many people, because a bishop still has to take responsibility for decisions made in his name.

Benedict could have said something like, "I'm heartsick over what happened, and with the benefit of hindsight it's clear I should have been more vigilant. I intend to reach out to Hullermann's victims to apologize, and this terrible tragedy illustrates the importance of the reforms we've put into place." Had that been the tone, outsiders might have been more inclined to listen to a defense of the pope on other cases ? especially because in the handful of other instances which have drawn coverage, his role was often minor and after-the-fact. Instead, an impression of blanket denial was created, which became the prism for everything else.

More deeply, I also speculated that the Vatican has been hampered in defending Benedict's record because it would imply indicting other senior Vatican officials, and perhaps ultimately tainting the memory of Pope John Paul II. That's a psychological and cultural bridge, I said, that many in the Vatican aren't ready to cross.

Weigel was asked to comment on whether the crisis indeed represents a stain on John Paul's legacy. He conceded the crisis wasn't handled well, especially towards the end when John Paul was already in decline. At the same time, Weigel argued, that breakdown has to be seen in the context of John Paul's broader renewal of the priesthood. Both John Paul and Benedict XVI, Weigel said, have inspired a new generation committed to a "heroic ideal of the priesthood," which, he said, suggests there will be few incidents of abuse down the line.

* * *

Understandably, Goodstein wanted to join the conversation. She said that when she began reporting on the latest wave of the crisis, she largely accepted the claim of "Ratzinger the Reformer," based partly on things that I and others had written.

Yet, she said, the 2010 stories upended that narrative, which placed the responsibility entirely on bishops for the failure to report and remove abusers. This year we learned of one case after another, she said, in which bishops

were pleading urgently with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Ratzinger to laicize a known molester, and the CDF rejected those requests. And, she added, we were always told that the CDF had nothing to do with these cases until 2001, but that turned out to be false also. In fact, they were handling them all along.

As a footnote, Goodstein said that much of the reporting was based on documents ? though she didn't add this herself, usually documents obtained from victims' lawyers. Those documents, she said, are the most revelatory evidence we have. The documents come from attorneys, she said, because the church sure is not handing them over.

Goodstein's question thus was: Didn't the reporting of 2010 add something to what we thought we knew?

I said that for me, the reporting fleshed out the picture, but didn't fundamentally alter it.

First, it's still true that pre-2001, most sex abuse cases never reached Rome because bishops relied on informal remedies rather than laicization (which requires Vatican approval, and was seen by many bishops as a cumbersome, expensive, and uncertain process). We already knew that before 2001, Ratzinger's approach to the few cases which reached his desk wasn't notably different from other senior Vatican personnel. Thus to produce a 1985 letter in which he urges caution in laicizing Stephen Kiesle of Oakland, for example, is certainly interesting, but not a paradigm-changer.

That go-slow approach in the 1980s and 1990s, I argued, still has to be balanced against expedited handling of hundreds of cases beginning in 2003, when Ratzinger obtained "special faculties" from John Paul II allowing him to waive a canonical trial and to remove an abuser from the priesthood more efficiently.

One can certainly argue that his awakening came late, and that not enough has yet been done ? perhaps especially in terms of matching the new accountability for priests with similar accountability for bishops. The fact remains, however, that the Vatican is today more committed to a "zero tolerance" policy because of Ratzinger's impact, both before and after his election.

If that point sometimes got lost earlier this year, it's probably one part a media failure to keep the whole picture in focus, and one part the Vatican's inability to project a different narrative.

Weigel threw in a couple of interesting footnotes. In terms of the response to the crisis under John Paul II, Weigel said that during the late pope's long illness, there was effectively no one in charge ? on sex abuse or almost anything else. The then-Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Angelo Sodano, was either "unprepared or unwilling," Weigel said, "to become a sort of prime minister as the king was dying."

Weigel also asserted that another element in understanding Vatican culture vis-à-vis the crisis is "the odd influence of the Latin American mind," which he described as "riddled with conspiracy theories." He was likely referring to suggestions from a few Latin American cardinals that media reporting on the crisis, especially in the United States, was calculated to stifle the church's advocacy on issues such as support for a Palestinian homeland.

* * *

We spent a fair bit of time in Miami doing some basic exercises in Vaticanology, which prompts a warning about relations between the Vatican and the media.

Several people, for instance, asked why there never seem to be consequences when somebody in Rome obviously screws up. To take one example, Sodano explosively compared criticism of the pope on the crisis to "petty gossip" during the 2010 Easter Sunday Mass, and yet he continues merrily along as dean of the College

of Cardinals. (When Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, later criticized Sodano, he actually got his knuckles rapped.)

I explained that in the culture of the Vatican, the way they typically signal disapproval of a statement from someone at Sodano's level isn't by overtly repudiating it, but rather by not repeating it. Insiders know that silence speaks volumes, although the outside world usually concludes that the guy got away scot free.

Two reactions from reporters are worth recording.

One said that while such insider scoop is interesting, it's of limited journalistic value. Editors won't tolerate sticking in four paragraphs of "Vatican context" into stories to explain every statement or decision that comes down the pike, this reporter said, because it smacks too much of apologetics ? i.e., trying to get the Vatican off the hook.

Another reporter made the point that when it comes to the crisis, media outlets have a limited appetite for nuance, because of the stark moral nature of the underlying issue ? the sexual exploitation of vulnerable children. In that regard, this reporter said, the media can be as "unchanging and relentless as the church."

The take-away seemed to be that unless the Vatican wants a perpetual war with the press, it needs to become more adept at translating its internal culture for the outside world.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. He can be reached at jallen@ncronline.org.]

Source URL (retrieved on *02/12/2016 - 08:41*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/press-and-sex-abuse-crisis-2010

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/21315