

On Libya, Ivory Coast, theological dissent, and Opening Day

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 1, 2011 | All Things Catholic

Stop me if you've heard this before: There's a pariah state someplace known for brutalizing its people and destabilizing its region. As cracks start to appear, the West turns up the heat in favor of regime change. Fairly quickly, talk of negotiations, sanctions, and international pressure gives way to armed force.

Western leaders try to sell the conflict as a moral cause, so people naturally wonder what the Vatican makes of it. Signals at first seem ambivalent, but before long the Vatican becomes steadily more skeptical. While they never quite directly condemn the action, the take-away is that they're not on board.

That, of course, was the trajectory in 1999, when NATO bombed Serbia; in 2001, when the war in Afghanistan began; and to some extent in 2003, when a U.S.-led "coalition of the willing" invaded Iraq, although Vatican opposition in that case was more clear from the outset. The pattern may now be repeating itself with regard to Libya.

Once again, the Vatican seems to be attempting a balancing act: Not wanting to compromise its relationships with the major Western powers, but also not wanting to lend moral cover to an open-ended war.

Cynics might be tempted to ask, "So what?" For a variety of reasons, the Vatican's moral authority these days, and thus its political punch, are not at an all-time high. Anyway, the White House -- under Republican and Democratic presidents alike -- and its allies already have proven that they don't need the pope's blessing to bomb whatever, and whomever, they like.

Yet, of course, it does matter. The Vatican remains the world's most important "soft power," the only religion with its own diplomatic corps. Its verdict carries weight, especially given that Obama and other Western leaders crave moral legitimacy. Further, the Vatican's line is also important for the Islamic "street," which sometimes struggles to distinguish Christianity from the foreign policy of Western governments.

With that in mind, here's some background to make sense of the Vatican's approach.

Benedict's words

So far, Benedict XVI has addressed the situation in Libya twice. Both statements came in his Sunday "Angelus" address, which is the usual occasion for popes to offer their thoughts on current events.

On March 20, Benedict appealed to military and political leaders to consider the safety of civilians, and in particular to guarantee access to humanitarian relief. Notably, there was no call for a cease-fire, and nothing else that clearly opened itself to interpretation as criticism of the allied operation.

On March 27, Benedict became more pointed, in a fashion that many analysts took as a signal of increasing opposition.

"My trepidation is growing for the safety and security of the civilian population," he said. "I address a heartfelt appeal to the international agencies and those who have political and military responsibility for an immediate start of dialogue that suspends the use of arms."

The spin in much media coverage was that Benedict was breaking with Western policy: While Obama and NATO press the fight, the pope calls for peace. Yet on background, Vatican diplomats this week dropped hints that analysts had missed a subtle point about the pope's language.

In Italian, they insist, Benedict did not call for dialogue "and" a suspension of combat, even though some reports in English created that impression. Instead, he referred to a dialogue "that" suspends the use of arms. The distinction is crucial, according to these Vatican diplomats.

Had Benedict said "and," it would have suggested an unconditional cease-fire, followed by efforts at negotiations; by saying "that," Benedict implied that agreement to talks comes first, which among other things means that the ball is not just in NATO's court to stop shooting. All parties, including Gadhafi, must agree to a negotiated settlement.

In other words, "and" would be the pacifist conjunction, while "that" leans more toward the carrot-and-stick approach. Whatever one makes of the exegesis, the fact that senior Vatican personnel are pitching it, in itself, says something about their eagerness to seem balanced.

It's reasonable to assume that Benedict XVI will continue to speak out on the situation in Libya, including special concern for persons displaced by the fighting, and the international community's obligation to care for the refugees. If not before, Sunday's Angelus address may offer another snapshot of evolving Vatican thinking.

The case for support

There are at least four compelling reasons why the Vatican might not want to be seen as directly opposing the Western campaign, at least for now.

First is a matter of method. As Benedict XVI has said on multiple occasions, the church is not a political party, and it recognizes the legitimate autonomy of the civil sphere. Thus while the Vatican can offer broad moral principles, at least theoretically it's also supposed to accept that civil leaders, not the church, must decide how those principles are applied in concrete situations.

Second, perhaps John Paul II's signal contribution to Catholic just war theory is the notion of "humanitarian intervention," meaning that armed force can be justified if it takes place under an international warrant, if it's limited in scope and protects non-combatants, and if it's a last resort to prevent crimes against humanity. If that framework is to cut ice in international affairs, the Vatican cannot automatically express knee-jerk opposition whenever someone tries to apply it.

Third, the Vatican doesn't want to be on the wrong side of history -- inadvertently propping up a dictator destined to fall. It also doesn't want to somehow discourage or delay a democratic revolution in the Arab world, which could provide the region's Christian minority some breathing room.

(As a footnote, many observers say any parallel between the uprising in Libya and the protest movements in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere is inexact. It's more akin to a civil war between two historic regions, Cyrenacia and Tripolitania, divided by tribal loyalties.)

Fourth, the Vatican has strong political reasons for not wanting to break with the Western governments leading

the charge. Sarkozy is the most pro-religion French leader of his generation, while Cameron in the U.K. wants a "big society" which makes space for religion in public life. While Obama may remain a more ambivalent figure in Vatican eyes, the Vatican still regards the United States as its most important diplomatic interlocutor, and doesn't want lines of communication to shut down.

The case for opposition

On the other hand, there are equally compelling considerations which might entice the Vatican to put some distance between itself and the NATO effort.

First, there's the question of what exactly an "international warrant" means. NATO forces say they're acting in Libya under the terms of United Nations resolutions 1970 and 1973, adopted by the Security Council. Yet from the Vatican's point of view, we've been down this road before -- the Bush administration claimed to be enforcing U.N. resolutions when it invaded Iraq.

In the past, the Vatican has expressed a preference for a "humanitarian intervention" not merely to invoke a U.N. vote, but to unfold in some sense under U.N. supervision, so that it comes off as a common undertaking of the international community and not just an expression of Western foreign policy.

Notably, *L'Osservatore Romano* gave front-page play yesterday to comments by Chinese Premier Hu Jintao that the NATO campaign in Libya could "violate the original intent" of the UN resolutions by putting civilians in greater danger.

Second, the Vatican doesn't want to fan the flames of a "clash of civilizations," appearing to support a protracted conflict that could come to be perceived as yet another Western assault on a Muslim nation.

Third, Vatican personnel and their advisors have the same doubts about the end-game in Libya that everyone else feels.

Recently Magdi Allam, a Muslim convert to Catholicism and a high-profile Italian politician and commentator who's taken very seriously in the Holy See, summed up the worst case scenario:

"The only real certainty is that the Islamists will win and that consequently, the populations of the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean will be increasingly submitted to *shariah* -- an outcome exactly the opposite of the official proclamations of Sarkozy and Obama and their excessive use of catchphrases such as "freedom" and "democracy."?"

To be sure, it's not as if Gadhafi has a profile as a great friend of Christianity. Things got off on a bad foot in 1969, when he seized power and swiftly expelled Italians from Libya, closed all the Catholic churches, and sold off their property. Over the years, he's been more than willing to play the Islamist card when it serves his interests.

Yet in other ways Gadhafi has been a firebreak against fundamentalism, and he can be surprisingly open to the church. It's well known that he wrote to John Paul II in 1986 to request Italian nuns to work in Libyan hospitals -- a tribute to the care Gadhafi's own father received from two Italian Franciscan sisters. Gadhafi also appreciated the Vatican's opposition to international sanctions in 1993, and its willingness to open diplomatic relations in 1997.

The Catholic community in Libya is tiny, composed almost entirely of foreign ex-pats. Even so, the Vatican has to consider what it's hearing from those folks -- including a warning from the Apostolic Vicar of Tripoli, Bishop Giovanni Martinelli, that the NATO bombing is endangering civilians. For instance, he reported on

Wednesday that two hospitals have been damaged and their patients sent into shock.

Fourth and finally, the Vatican is influenced by the simple fact of being in Italy. Libya, of course, was an Italian colony from 1912 to 1947, and conservative Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi prides himself on having cultivated a friendship with Gadhafi. Perhaps because of that history, Italy has taken a less bellicose line. Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini has called for a cease-fire, and even offered Italy's services to negotiate an exile for Gadhafi.

Naturally, Italy also has a strong practical motive for seeking to contain the violence in Libya, since it's by far the most sought-after port of call for Libyan refugees.

The position of the Italian government has traction inside the Vatican, especially with Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State. Despite all the personal scandals swirling around Berlusconi, and despite various ways in which his government and the church have clashed (immigration policy comes to mind), he's still fundamentally seen by Bertone and his aides as an ally.

The logic runs this way: The EU proved itself an unreliable partner for the Catholic church, and no one in the Vatican knows quite what to make of Obama. Berlusconi and the Vatican, on the other hand, need each other. Berlusconi picks up badly needed domestic support, and the Vatican gains a carrier for its international agenda.

Since Italian policy seems in flux, that's perhaps another point nudging the Vatican in the same direction.

How these competing forces may play out is anyone's guess, but observers in Rome say one thing is clear. At a time when Vatican diplomacy otherwise seems to be going through a period of retrenchment, officials in the Holy See are in a full, upright and locked position on the Libya crisis.

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Just because Libya has captured the interest of the West doesn't mean it's the only global hotspot the pope has his eyes on. The Vatican is also worried about the Ivory Coast, where fighting broke out following disputed elections last November. Reportedly, one million people have been displaced and several hundred killed since violence erupted in December.

An example of the insecurity came this week, with news that a diocesan director of Caritas, the Catholic relief agency, named Fr. Richard Kissi, has been kidnapped by an armed group. He was on his way to evacuate seminarians in an area hard-hit by the fighting. In Rome, Caritas officials called for Kissi's immediate release.

During his General Audience on Wednesday, Benedict XVI announced that he's sending Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, President of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, to Ivory Coast as his personal envoy to try to promote a peaceful settlement.

That move is significant for three reasons.

First, it's a reflection of the Vatican's determination that Africa should not be forgotten. That's not merely a question of social justice and global solidarity, but also a reflection of demography. Sub-Saharan Africa is the zone of greatest growth for Catholicism today, with the Catholic population increasing by almost 7,000 percent in the 20th century. As goes Africa, in many ways, so goes Catholicism in the 21st century.

Second, and not unrelated to the point above, Africa is a place where the Catholic church packs considerable political punch. Although Catholics are only about 17 percent of the population in Ivory Coast, the church has long been a major social force. Famously, under former President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the largest church in the world, Our Lady of Peace, was constructed in the administrative capital of Yamoussoukro. (Before

agreeing to consecrate it, John Paul II insisted that a hospital and youth center be erected nearby.) As a result, Ivory Coast is a place where papal intervention could have legs.

Third, the move is also a confirmation of Turkson's status as a rising star. He has the trust of Benedict XVI, he's widely admired in Catholic peace and justice circles, and he's seen in the Vatican as a serious figure. If Turkson is able to make a difference on his current mission, his stock would climb even further.

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An important story to break out of the States this week was a statement issued by the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. bishops' conference, criticizing a widely read 2007 book by American theologian Sr. Elizabeth Johnson of Fordham University. My story on the statement can be found here: <http://ncronline.org/news/spirituality/us-bishops-blast-book-feminist-theologian>

While the story outlines the substantive issues involved, here I'll offer three thoughts on process.

First, this is the fourth critical statement about a theologian's work issued by the Committee on Doctrine since 2007. In each case, the approach has been more or less the same: A lengthy exposition of the problems the bishops found in the book, but no disciplinary measures attached -- no bans on teaching or publishing, not even a requirement that future editions of the book have to carry the bishops' critique.

I realize that for people inclined to sympathize with the theologian, it may be difficult to give the bishops points for style. This approach, however, does seem to respond to two oft-voiced criticisms over the years of the way the hierarchy deals with theological dissent.

People used to grouse that authority figures issued anathemas without actually reading the book in question, relying on media reports and second-hand letters of complaint. Further, critics charged that the hierarchy made things personal by not merely engaging a theologian's ideas, but also by imposing sanctions. Those two complaints, at least, no longer apply to the way the USCCB Committee on Doctrine is operating. (One can agree or not with the conclusions the statement reaches, but it's clear the authors did study the book, even down to providing page citations for the points they make.)

Second, Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C. chair of the Committee on Doctrine, issued some brief remarks along with the formal statement. One key point concerned the *imprimatur*. In effect, Wuerl suggested that a public rebuke might have been avoided if Johnson had requested an *imprimatur* before publication, which could have flagged potential problems in advance.

Tensions over the *imprimatur* are typically framed in terms of academic freedom: Should a theologian really need a seal of approval from authority to publish her or his ideas? Wuerl's comment, however, suggests another way of thinking about it. In a time when many people complain that dialogue between the bishops and the theological guild is under-developed, requesting an *imprimatur* is one way of kick-starting a conversation.

Third, Johnson raised a process concern herself in a statement released by the Fordham communications office. In addition to asserting that the bishops' critique at times "radically misinterprets what I wrote," Johnson also said she was never consulted.

"I would have been glad to enter into conversation to clarify critical points, but was never invited to do so," Johnson said. "This book was discussed and finally assessed by the committee before I knew any discussion had taken place."

That said, Johnson added that "I have always taken criticism as a valuable opportunity to delve more deeply into a subject."

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Fans of "The Simpsons" will recall the episode "Lisa the Skeptic," in which discovery of a fossil resembling an angel sparks speculation about the end of the world. Reports reach all the way to Rome, where a monsignor rushes into St. Peter's basilica to inform the pope. The pontiff lifts his eyes from a newspaper and calmly replies, "Keep an eye on it."

For the record, the newspaper in the pope's hands was *La Stampa* -- a Turin-based daily, the third largest paper in Italy. It's yet another case in which "The Simpsons" was prophetic, since more and more, *La Stampa* is becoming the Vatican's favorite read.

La Stampa already has added a number of writers known to be "church-friendly," including a former spokesperson for the "Communion and Liberation" movement and a former staffer at Vatican Radio. Now the paper has landed a truly big fish: Andrea Tornielli, the longtime *vaticanista* for *Il Giornale*, who's widely regarded as the best-connected Vatican writer in the business.

Tornielli's move to *La Stampa* is considered a big deal in both journalistic and ecclesiastical circles in Italy, a tribute to his influence. Given the deeply conspiratorial ethos of Italian life, it's also prompted a flurry of speculation about what's really going on.

One popular theory holds that because *Il Giornale* is Berlusconi-owned, Tornielli's departure augurs deterioration in relations between church and state. By that logic, Tornielli was perceived by Berlusconi cronies as too church-friendly, especially with regard to Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the former president of the Italian bishops' conference. Ruini is widely seen as the main rival for preeminence in Italy of Berlusconi's preferred interlocutor in the hierarchy, Bertone.

Since Tornielli is a friend, I asked him this week to explain things:

"I'd love to be able to tell you about "political" motives involving the Vatican, as a great Italian conspiracy theory, but that's not how it is. It's simply a job offer: I'm going to *La Stampa* as a columnist, doing analysis and commentary on the Vatican and the church. I respect the editor there a lot, and so I said "yes." There aren't any other reasons, in part because at *Il Giornale* (including my blog), I've always enjoyed complete freedom."

In other words, this is a classic case of how sometimes the Machiavellian frame, even in Italy, isn't the best fit.

On the other hand, it does mean that for Catholic insiders who rely on the Italian papers to keep them up to date on the Vatican, *La Stampa* now looks like the destination of choice.

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I've always wondered how anyone born in St. Louis, great baseball town that it is, could possibly regard April as the cruelest month. With all due respect to T.S. Eliot, any month that usually features both Easter and Opening Day just can't be that bad. (Bear in mind that by the time Eliot was born in 1888, the St. Louis Brown Stockings, who eventually morphed into the Cardinals, had already won four American Association pennants in a row as well as the 1886 World Series against the forerunner of the Chicago Cubs, so it's not like he could be excused on the grounds of getting there too early.)

Yesterday marked the opening of the 2011 campaign, so in honor of the occasion, I'll roll out my personal list of the "Top Nine Reasons why Baseball is to Sports what Catholicism is to Religion." Why nine? It's a key number in both traditions -- nine players on a diamond, nine innings in a game, and nine days to a novena.

The following are nine reasons why Catholicism and baseball are, quite literally, a match made in Heaven:

1. Both baseball and Catholicism venerate the past. Both have a Communion of Saints, all the way down to popular shrines and holy cards.
2. Both feature obscure rules that make sense only to initiates. (Think the Infield Fly rule for baseball fans and the Pauline privilege for Catholics.)
3. Both have a keen sense of ritual, in which pace is critically important. (As a footnote, that's why basketball is more akin to Pentecostalism; both are breathless affairs premised largely on ecstatic experience.)
4. Both generate oceans of statistics, arcana, and lore. For entry-level examples, try: Who has the highest lifetime batting average, with a minimum of 1,000 at-bats? (Ty Cobb). Which popes had the longest and the shortest reigns? (Pius IX and Urban VII).
5. In both baseball and Catholicism, you can dip in and out, but for serious devotees the liturgy is a daily affair.
6. Both are global games which are especially big right now in Latin America. (Though I'm principally a Yankees fan, I live in Denver, where the Rockies' starting rotation is composed of two pitchers from the Dominican Republic, a Venezuelan, a Mexican, and a guy from South Carolina. In a lot of dioceses, that's not unlike the makeup of the presbyterate these days.)
7. Both baseball and Catholicism have been badly tainted by scandal, with the legacies of erstwhile superstars utterly ruined. Yet both have proved surprisingly resilient -- perhaps demonstrating that the game is great enough to survive even the best efforts of those in charge at any given moment to ruin it.
8. Both have a complex farm system, and fans love to speculate about who the next hot commodity will be in "The Show."
9. Both reward patience. If you're the kind of person who needs immediate results, neither baseball nor Catholicism is really your game.

As an "extra innings" bonus, I'll toss in my theory as to why the American League represents the Catholic instinct in baseball, while the National League is more Protestant.

Famously, the National League does not permit the designated hitter, reflecting a sort of fundamentalist Puritanism. It's not the way the game was originally played, and no power on earth has the authority to add or subtract to scripture. The American League, however, has adopted the designated hitter, striking a balance between scripture and tradition. The designated hitter rule, in fact, is arguably an athletic analogue of what Pope Benedict XVI talks about as a "hermeneutics of continuity," of reform without rupture.

By the way, if I'm right about that, a great irony presents itself: Both the Cardinals and the Padres play in the more "Protestant" National League!

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