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

Laicizing bishops, a movie flap, Ireland and America, and Vatican II

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 21, 2011 All Things Catholic

On any list of storylines the Vatican would not have wanted to see in the run-up to Easter, not to mention the looming beatification of John Paul II on May 1, the case of Belgian Bishop Roger Vangheluwe would have to finish pretty much at the top. Just when you think the sexual abuse crisis can?t become any more appalling, or surreal, along comes Vangheluwe to prove that it can.

Last year, Vangheluwe resigned as the bishop of Bruges after admitting he had repeatedly abused a nephew for 13 years, beginning when Vangheluwe was a priest and continuing while he was a bishop. On April 12, the Vatican announced that Vangheluwe has been barred from any public exercise of ministry and was to leave Belgium for treatment while the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reviews his case.

The clear intent was that Vangheluwe, 74, would stay out of sight while the Vatican figured out what to do.

Instead, Vangheluwe went on Flemish TV on April 14 and proceeded to make things significantly worse. Among other points, he admitted to abusing a second nephew, denied being a pedophile, claimed that his victims had not objected, and called his behavior ?a little piece of intimacy? rather than ?abuse or physical violence.? Those comments brought calls from senior Belgian politicians, and even from several Belgian bishops, for swift punishment by Rome.

By ?punishment,? people typically mean laicization, or formal removal from the episcopacy and the priesthood. (Of course, police and prosecutors in Belgium have to decide whether Vangheluwe will face criminal charges. That still leaves the question, however, of what ecclesiastical penalties he should face.)

On background, Vatican officials say they?re following events in Belgium carefully, and they?re aware of the damage the Vangheluwe interview has done. In fact, they say, the interview was so bizarre that it raises questions about Vangheluwe?s mental stability and his grasp of his situation. On that basis, they say, a period of monitoring and evaluation has to unfold before a final decision can be reached, away from the pressure created by intense media attention. Bottom line: We may be talking months, not days, before a final decision comes.

While we wait, two notes about laicization and bishops.

First, some Belgian commentators, including a couple of canon lawyers who ought to know better, have suggested that the church has no process for laicizing a bishop. In reality, bishops certainly can be laicized, although it?s extremely rare. Two recent cases in point are Fernando Lugo, a former bishop in Paraguay who was laicized in 2008 after being elected the country?s president, and Emmanuel Milingo, laicized in 2009 after getting married, founding a breakaway ?Married Priests Now!? movement, and ordaining bishops in defiance of Rome.

Both respect for the episcopal office and for the theology of the priesthood as being for life counsel caution, but the Lugo and Milingo cases demonstrate that laicization of a bishop is nonetheless possible under what the Vatican defined in its Dec. 17, 2009, decree on Milingo as ?most extraordinary? circumstances.

Also worth noting is the letter to the bishops of the world from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in May 2010, which indicated that Pope Benedict XVI had confirmed its authority even over ?cardinals, patriarchs, legates of the Apostolic See, [and] bishops? in cases of grave offenses such as the sexual abuse of a minor. Those powers had originally been granted by John Paul II and were extended by Benedict XVI in 2005.

Second, there continues to be debate about whether laicization of an abuser is always the best remedy. Monsignor Stephen Rossetti, for instance, is a psychologist and longtime director of the St. Luke Institute in Silver Spring, Maryland, which treats abuser priests. If the aim is protecting children, Rossetti argues, cutting ties with the abuser may actually make things worse. By eliminating any supervision or means of support, laicization can increase the risk that the cleric will re-offend.

The Vangheluwe case raises the question in especially clear terms. Faced with an elderly bishop who may not fully understand the gravity of his conduct, what?s the responsible thing to do? Is it to send a clear message that abuse will not be tolerated, by expelling him from the clerical ranks? Or is it to impose a life of prayer and penance, with the understanding that he will be housed in a setting where he can be monitored, given the support he needs, and kept on the straight and narrow? Is it, perhaps, possible to do both?

Whenever the Vatican makes its final determination, it will be closely scrutinized as a possible template for resolving similar situations elsewhere.

It could be relevant, for instance, in the case of Canadian Bishop Raymond Lahey, who resigned as bishop of Antigonish in 2009 after Canadian Border Service officials seized his laptop, which allegedly contained child pornography, while Lahey was reentering the country from a trip abroad. Lahey?s criminal trial is scheduled to begin next month, and Vatican officials have said they?re awaiting the outcome before they launch an ecclesiastical process. (Under recent revisions to church law, the possession of child pornography has been defined as a ?grave offense? which could trigger laicization.)

The same sequence could play out in Belgium. Prosecutors have said they?re studying new complaints that Vangheluwe and another priest sexually abused two boys at a camp in the 1960s, one of whom reportedly later committed suicide.

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Whenever a pop culture phenomenon erupts with which Catholics have a beef, there?s always tension over the best response. Is it to protest, thereby demonstrating that there?s a price to pay for picking on the church? Or is it to exercise benign neglect, thereby depriving the instigators of the thing they usually want most -- controversy, which typically translates into higher box office receipts or book sales?

That question is percolating again in Italy this week, where a new movie by acclaimed Italian filmmaker Nanni Morreti is stirring debate. (Moretti is not only one of Italy?s most successful directors, but he?s also a strong political leftist and critic of the current Berlusconi government.)

The movie is titled ?Habemus Papam,? the Latin phrase used to announce the election of a pope. The plot centers on a newly elected pontiff who?s so overwhelmed by the magnitude of the job that he needs a psychotherapist, played by Moretti himself. So far it?s a box office hit in Italy, pulling in almost the equivalent of $2 million dollars in its opening weekend, and it?s set to compete at the Cannes film festival.

To be sure, not everybody in the Catholic world is up in arms at the suggestion that a new pope might need some hand-holding. After all, Benedict XVI actually compared his election in 2005 to capital punishment, saying that during the conclave he felt the ?guillotine? falling upon him. Both the Jesuit journal *Civiltà Cattolica* , which has a semi-official Vatican status, and Vatican Radio suggested there?s nothing to be offended by, and

famed Vatican writer Vittorio Messori actually praised the film in *Corriere della Sera* for upsetting the usual anticlerical stereotypes of preening cardinals lusting for power.

All that, however, failed to convince Salvatore Izzo, another well known Italian Catholic journalist, who publicly called for a boycott of the film in the pages of *L?Avvenire*, the official newspaper of the Italian bishops. In essence, Izzo?s argument boils down to this: Moretti crossed a line by poking fun not just at the church or its leaders as a class, but the pope himself.

?We shouldn?t touch the pope -- the rock on which Jesus founded his Church,? Izzo wrote.

A certain type of Catholic, of course, reacts to satire about the pope the way some Americans react to insults about their mother ? i.e., not well. In this case, Izzo insisted that Catholics should not financially support a movie that insults their religion, hence the call for a boycott.

The odds of that happening don?t seem especially good, given that many other prominent Catholic voices in Italy aren?t on board.

Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli, for instance, wrote the following by way of reply to Izzo: ?We live in times in which putting a film on the Index contributes to its success and creates curiosity. The effect of certain campaigns, in sum, is exactly the opposite of what the boycotters anticipate. Personally, I think it?s better to use the weapon of a boycott only in those cases of works which are truly ?blasphemous? -- of which, alas, there?s no shortage.?

At the moment there?s no release date for ?Habemus Papam? in the United States, but if and when it eventually makes its way to the American market, it will be interesting to see how Catholics here react -- including whether we feel compelled to repeat the debate that?s already occurred in Italy.

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As a journalist, I?m constantly struck by the way intelligent observers of church affairs can look at the same set of facts and draw diametrically opposing conclusions. Two Catholic storylines in recent days illustrate the point.

One comes out of Ireland, where the church is preparing for yet another highly critical government report on its handling of the sexual abuse crisis. This time the focus is on the diocese of Cloyne, in rural southern Ireland, which until his resignation last year was led by Bishop John Magee -- an erstwhile private secretary to Popes Paul VI, John Paul I, and John Paul II. (Devotees of Vatican intrigue may recall that Magee was initially said to have discovered the body of John Paul I, though that story fell apart when it emerged that it was actually a nun who had brought the pope?s morning coffee who found him dead.)

Recently the Irish High Court approved publication of the Cloyne report, which now seems likely to appear in early May, with the exception of one chapter concerning a priest currently facing a criminal trial.

On the one hand, many will see the Cloyne report as another devastating blow for the church, especially because it focuses not on cases from decades ago, but on complaints filed between 1996 and 2009. The report shows that although the Irish bishops supposedly adopted tough new policies in 1996, including a pledge to report alleged abuse to the police, Magee didn?t follow those policies as recently as 2008. Like the Philadelphia Grand Jury report in the United States, therefore, the Cloyne report in Ireland seems to seriously undercut claims that the problem is in the past.

Others, however, will insist that the Cloyne report proves that the church really has turned a corner. That?s because the first investigation of Cloyne was carried out by a church oversight panel, the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church, led by a widely respected Presbyterian child protection expert

named Ian Elliot. The board?s 2008 conclusions were highly critical of Magee, which is what triggered the government to launch its own review. Those inclined to give the church the benefit of the doubt will therefore say that however devastating the Cloyne report may be, it?s actually a result of the church?s own commitment to accountability.

So, which is it? Does the Cloyne report show a church that can?t be trusted to honor its own promises, or a church that?s finally on the road to recovery? The frustratingly complex reality is that each view probably captures some truth, and each, if pressed too far, becomes an exercise in spin.

The second case in point comes from the United States, involving the relationship between bishops and theologians. Everyone knows those ties are strained these days (among some bishops and some theologians more than others, of course), but the question is who?s responsible for it.

The story centers on Sr. Elizabeth Johnson of Fordham University, one of America?s most acclaimed Catholic theologians, whose 2007 book *Quest for the Living God* was recently criticized by the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. bishops? conference for undermining ?the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in the Gospel,? especially in its treatment of the Trinity.

Critics of how the bishops have handled the situation, including the Catholic Theological Society of America, have complained not only that the bishops misread the book, but that Johnson was not consulted before the Committee on Doctrine issued its statement. They note that such a procedure is at odds with the bishops? own 1989 policy on resolving disputes with theologians, which states that ?informal conversation? should occur before other steps are taken. (For the record, Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., chair of the Committee on Doctrine, sent a letter to bishops on April 18 which asserts that the 1989 policy applies to relationships between individual bishops and theologians, not the committee.)

Observers sympathetic to the bishops tend to start the clock rolling earlier on when failures in communication occur. Theologians these days typically don?t request an *imprimatur* prior to publication, they say, which is the time-honored mechanism in the church for testing the waters to find out if there?s going to be a problem. Of course, a theologian can always publish anyway if the *imprimatur* is denied, but following the process at least kick-starts dialogue. It?s disingenuous, such observers say, for theologians to avoid any conversation with the bishops before they publish, then complain about a lack of dialogue when bishops respond after their book is already on the market and shaping belief in seminaries, theology departments, and at the grassroots.

Once again, both perspectives may be worth considering -- especially given that when there?s a breakdown in communication, it?s rare that one party is entirely to blame.

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More often than not, people like to see their own convictions as a middle position between two extremes. We all feel better, I suppose, thinking of ourselves as rational moderates, standing against ideologues on either side.

When it comes to interpretations of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), some progressive Catholics are tempted to see Pope Benedict XVI?s ?hermeneutic of reform,? which stresses continuity with the pre-Vatican II church, as the opposite end of the spectrum from more liberal views. That?s not, however, how most people in the Vatican size things up, where the ?hermeneutic of reform? is instead understood as a balanced position between thinking that church history began with Vatican II, and thinking that the council was just plain wrong.

For that taxonomy to work, there have to be credible exponents of the ?just plain wrong? position. That?s where Italian historian Roberto de Mattei and Monsignor Brunero Gherardini, a canon of St. Peter?s Basilica, enter the picture.

Both have published provocative books about Vatican II. Last year, de Mattei offered *Il Concilio Vaticano II: Una storia mai scritta* (?The Second Vatican Council: A Story Never Told?), styling Vatican II as a rupture with tradition comparable to the French Revolution, and faulting every pope since Pius X for allowing it to happen. Gherardini produced *Concilio Vaticano II: Il discorso mancato* (?The Second Vatican Council: The Missing Discussion?), in which he said some council fathers believed ?the church was to be a kind of research laboratory rather than a dispenser of truths from on high.?

Both books were recently reviewed in *L?Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, and in both cases the verdict was fairly negative. The commentary on de Mattei came from Italian Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, author of a study of the council openly critical of the more liberal ?Bologna school? associated with Italian scholars Giuseppe Alberigo and Alberto Melloni. Marchetto wrote that de Mattei?s work is ?ideological? and suffers from ?extremist tendencies.? Likewise, Inos Biffi, a medieval expert and a frequent writer for *L?Osservatore*, charged that Gherardini doesn?t so much ?discuss? Vatican II as ?denigrate? it.

The dividing line is this: If the post-Vatican II period brought some confusion and excess, is that the fault of the council itself? Benedict XVI, and figures in sync with his views such as Marchetto and Biffi, say no; traditionalist critics such as de Mattei and Gherardini say yes.

All this illustrates a core insight about the Catholic Church: Deciding who the moderates are depends on the range of views one takes into consideration. When you see the whole picture, it?s often tougher to conclude that the Vatican, or the pope, represents an extreme.

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On Saturday, I?ll be on my way to Rome to cover the May 1 beatification of Pope John Paul II, which will certainly be the Vatican?s biggest public happening of 2010. Beginning on Monday, April 25, I?ll be posting a daily Q&A about the beatification on the ?NCR Today? blog, featuring answers to questions such as:

- How does the sainthood process work, and how much does it cost?
- Should popes be beatified and canonized at all?
- What?s the rush in the case of John Paul II?
- Does this amount to a ratification of John Paul?s papacy -- including his record on the sexual abuse crisis?

In the meantime, **here?s a piece I wrote for the most recent issue of*Newsweek*** [1] on the beatification.

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Finally, it?s an oft-noted irony that while the Vatican has some serious structural problems when it comes to communications, Benedict XVI himself can be a fairly adept communicator. His chops will be on display again tomorrow, as he goes on Italian TV to respond to viewer questions about his book *Jesus of Nazareth*. (If this were anyone else, one might be tempted to see it as a marketing exercise designed to boost book sales.)

To be clear, this isn?t ?Meet the Press.? A few questions have been selected in advance from around 2,000 submitted by viewers of the religious affairs program ?In His Image,? which is broadcast on RAI, the Italian state network. The pope has pre-recorded his replies, which will be aired on Good Friday.

Although Benedict has participated in Q&A sessions before, in meetings with clergy, youth, and reporters on papal trips, this is the first time he or any other pope has gone on television to answer questions from viewers. (John Paul II once called into an Italian talk show, but the host was so flustered he didn?t manage to pop a question.) Even though it?s an orchestrated exchange, it?s nonetheless another chapter in the Vatican?s slow, and sometimes grudging, effort to open up.

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