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Benedict's gentle debunk of clericalism

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 30, 2012 All Things Catholic

Pope Benedict XVI's diplomatic high-wire act in Havana, pressing the case for religious freedom but avoiding direct clash with the Castro regime, was the main news flash out of his March 23-28 trip to Mexico and Cuba. Yet there was another *leitmotif* to the outing, more subtle but arguably more decisive for the church across Latin America.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the pope offered a gentle, yet unmistakable, debunking of clericalism. His focus seemed to be the gradual reshaping of ecclesial culture, not sexy short-term headlines, which puts it squarely into Benedict's wheelhouse.

Catholicism in Latin America is wildly diverse, from the emotional popular Catholicism of various Marian devotions to the "base communities" that were the backbone of liberation theology. One important current, however, has long been a remarkably strong form of clericalism, perhaps the inevitable result of the faith being effectively a monopoly until quite recently.

Typical expressions of this clericalism include:

- Clergy see themselves as political powerbrokers, playing a direct role in affairs of state.
- The church projects an image of power and privilege, with its preferred spiritual imagery emphasizing God as a cosmic monarch.
- The role of the laity is conceived in largely passive terms -- "pay, pray and obey."
- Little premium is placed on evangelization or faith formation, with pastoral care understood largely in terms of administering the sacraments.

The negative pastoral consequences of this kind of clericalism are now stunningly clear. Facing the twin onslaughts of secularism in some circles and Pentecostalism pretty much everywhere, the Catholic church across Latin America sustained massive losses in percentage terms during the late 20th century. (Raw numbers of Catholics rose as a result of the overall population boom, but the Catholic share of the continent declined, partly because of the astronomic growth of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christianity.)

It may seem ironic that a papal trip, with all of its attendant clerical imagery, would be the vehicle for a critique of clericalism. It might also seem ironic, at least to some, that Benedict would be the pope to do it, given that critics through the years have accused him of defending a sort of "high church" ecclesiology over against a popular Catholicism "from below."

The fabric of history, however, is often stitched with irony, and this trip seems a compelling case in point.

The church and politics

First, Benedict insisted that the Catholic church is not a political party, and that its most important contribution

to political life is the formation of individual consciences -- putting the premium on the role of clergy as pastors, not pundits or activists.

Benedict struck that note even before arriving in Latin America, on the papal plane shortly after takeoff from Rome. In response to a question about the church's political role, he stressed that one has to be clear about "what the church can and should do, and what it can't and shouldn't do" -- a reference to the danger of directly partisan stands.

In León's Bicentennial Park, Benedict offered a meditation on "Cristo Rey," meaning "Christ the King," which was the rallying cry of the Cristeros during the Mexican Revolution and is still invoked today by elements of the Mexican church as a sort of political banner.

"His kingdom does not stand on the power of his armies subduing others through force or violence," the pope said. "It rests on a higher power that wins over hearts -- the love of God."

In that spirit, Benedict called on Catholics to be "courageous in humility."

Benedict walked his own talk, avoiding anything that might be construed as direct political commentary in the run-up to Mexico's July elections. Mexico's Catholic leadership is often perceived as aligned in favor of the conservative National Action Party, and some feared the papal trip would amount to a campaign rally.

Yet Benedict never said anything about the looming elections, even something anodyne like a generic call to electoral responsibility. Strikingly, he largely avoided the hot-button issues of abortion and gay marriage, both of which are in play in Mexico and other parts of Latin America. (During his Angelus remarks Sunday, Benedict did refer to the importance of "defense and respect for human life.")

As far as the political loyalties of the Catholic church, Benedict insisted that the church should "stand beside those who are marginalized as the result of force, power or a prosperity which is blind to the poorest of the poor."

The pope did say that the faith must have consequences for public life, at one point rejecting a "schizophrenia" that tries to separate private ethics and public morality. Yet even here, the pope stressed that the role of the church is "education of consciences" rather than offering direct legislative solutions.

In general, Benedict XVI seemed determined to offer Latin America an example of how a senior Catholic cleric could spend several days in an intense media spotlight without coming off as a politician in a cassock.

A God who's 'small and close'

During his remarks aboard the papal plane, Benedict delivered a meditation on what he called in Italian an "essentialized Christianity," meaning a Christianity focused on "the fundamental basis for living today amid all the problems of our time."

At the heart of that Christianity of the essentials, the pope argued, is the idea of a God who is small and close to each human person -- in addition to the "great and majestic" God, the sort of spiritual imagery long associated with a clericalist church.

"We see the rationality of the cosmos, we see that there's something behind it, but we don't see how close this God is, how God concerns me, too," the pope said.

"This synthesis of the great and majestic God, as well as the small God who's close to me and who shows me the values of my life, is the nucleus of evangelization," Benedict said.

In his speech to the Latin American bishops, Benedict argued that this notion of a small and close God flows naturally into a spirit of service.

"The church cannot separate the praise of God from service to others," he said.

"The one God, our father and creator, has made us brothers and sisters: to be human is to be a brother and guardian to our neighbor," the pope said. "Along this path, in union with the whole human family, the church must relive and make present what Jesus was: the Good Samaritan who came from afar, entered our human history, lifted us up and sought to heal us."

No second-class citizenship for laity

Benedict's most direct swipe at clericalism came in discussion of the lay role in the church.

Not coincidentally, the pope chose an address to the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean in León's cathedral to make the point, emphasizing that he was speaking not just to Mexico but to the entire continent.

"Greater attention is due to the members of the lay faithful most engaged in the fields of catechesis, liturgical animation, charitable activity and social commitment," the pope said. "Their faith formation is critical if the Gospel is to become present and fruitful in contemporary society."

That alone would be enough to pull the rug out from under an über-clericalist psychology, in which applying the faith to contemporary society is treated as the exclusive province of the clerical caste and "faith formation" for laity has sometimes been an afterthought more honored in the breach than the observance.

To be sure that no one missed the point, however, Benedict added an even more direct injunction about the laity.

"It is not right for them to feel treated like second-class citizens in the church," he said, "despite the committed work which they carry out in accordance with their proper vocation, and the great sacrifice which this dedication at times demands of them."

The pope also called for "a spirit of communion" to prevail among priests, religious and the lay faithful, insisting that "sterile divisions, criticism and unhealthy mistrust" should be avoided.

The 'Continental Mission'

Finally, Benedict repeatedly endorsed the call for a great "Continental Mission," which came out of the last general assembly of the Latin American bishops in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007, which the pope attended.

The twin pillars of this "Continental Mission", as it was conceived five years ago, are:

- A strong role for the laity as the front-line evangelists
- A solid formation in the faith for all of Latin America's Catholic population, not just clerical (or even lay) elites

Time and again, Benedict XVI returned to this idea, stressing that evangelization and faith formation are everybody's concern.

"The Continental Mission now taking place in the various dioceses of this continent has the specific task of transmitting this conviction to all Christians and ecclesial communities," the pope said, "so that they may resist

the temptation of a faith that is superficial and routine, at times fragmentary and incoherent."

That bit about a "superficial" faith is, indirectly at least, a swipe at one of the most notorious pathologies of clericalism, in which most laity are baptized, confirmed and married in the church, but otherwise left to fend for themselves.

The obvious fallout from that *laissez-faire* pastoral approach has been captured in a bit of Spanish argot: *Católico ignorante, seguro Protestante*, which, loosely translated, means, "An ignorant Catholic will, for sure, become a Protestant." The idea is that somebody who doesn't know why they're Catholic in the first place is a good candidate to take their religious business elsewhere when an attractive offer comes along.

Benedict called for this Continental Mission to be at the heart of the "Year of Faith" he recently proclaimed.

A footnote on the cartels and Maciel

In remarks on Saturday during a vespers service, before a gathering of Latin American bishops that one Italian writer referred to as a "Latin conclave," Benedict XVI referred to "our weakness and needs" and the reality of "human evil and ignorance," even within the church.

The comments were interpreted as an indirect reference to two chapters of recent Mexican history that have badly stained the image of Catholic clergy: the cozy relationship some clergy appear to have with the drug cartels and their overlords -- who sometimes attend Mass and even give money to the church to demonstrate their Catholic bona fides -- and the case of the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, who committed various forms of sexual abuse and misconduct.

Benedict never directly mentioned the Maciel case, and declined a request to meet with Maciel's victims. In a session with young people, however, the pope invited "everyone to protect and to care for children, so that nothing may extinguish their smile, but that they may live in peace and look to the future with confidence."

Will it work?

Changing the ecclesial culture of an entire continent isn't easy, and most observers will tell you that the deconstruction of clericalism in Latin America is still a work in progress. Moreover, it's not clear if the new embrace by the bishops of a robust missionary spirit featuring lay leadership is truly a matter of *metanoia*, of a lasting change of heart and mind, or simply a pragmatic response to getting their teeth kicked in by the Pentecostals.

Yet there are signs that Catholicism in Latin America, in fits and starts, is navigating the transition from clericalism to a more dynamic (and, of course, therefore more fissiparous and frenetic) spirit of entrepreneurial hustle.

In his 2008 book *Conversion of a Continent*, Dominican Fr. Edward Cleary argues that Latin America is in the grip of a religious upheaval, with Pentecostalism as its leading edge. Yet Catholicism too, Cleary argues, is also becoming more dynamic, generating higher levels of commitment among those who remain. Cleary believes that this Catholic awakening had its roots in lay movements that go back to the 1930s and '40s, but it's been jump-started by healthy competition from the Pentecostals.

If the transition away from unhealthy clericalism is brought to a successful conclusion, Benedict's March 2012 trip may be remembered as a turning point -- not so much in terms of triggering the shift, perhaps, but at least lending it papal support.

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