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Leaks confirm ambivalence about Neocatechumenal Way

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 4, 2012 NCR Today

Both a brand new Vatican leak, and one contained in the avalanche of secret documents already published by an Italian journalist, depict deep ambivalence among the pope?s most senior aides about the controversial lay movement the Neocatechumenal Way.

The documents illustrate doubts about both the worship style of the Neocatechumenate, and its missionary activities.

Born in Spain in 1964, the Neocatechumenate is a program of adult faith formation typically organized into parish-based communities of 20-50 people, with some 40,000 such communities worldwide and a total following estimated at one million.

The movement has long been controversial. Some critics complain of fanaticism and unthinking obedience, while others object to allegedly heterodox teachings and liturgical practices. (For instance, gathering around a table for the Mass rather than an altar, and having laity deliver ?resonances? in addition to the homily). Bishops and pastors in various parts of the world have sometimes objected that the Neocatechumenate divides parishes and amounts to a ?parallel church.?

Over the weekend, the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* published three new leaked Vatican documents, including a January 14, 2012, letter from American Cardinal Raymond Burke, president of the Vatican?s highest court, to Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State. In it, Burke told Bertone that he had received an invitation to a January 20 celebration of Vatican approval for the Neocatechumenate?s approach to worship.

Burke is widely regarded as among the more conservative prelates in the Vatican, with strong ties to liturgical traditionalists. According to the report, Burke?s letter was sent on Jan. 16 and quickly forwarded to the pope.

According to the text of the leaked document, Burke wrote:

?As a cardinal and a member of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, I cannot avoid expressing to Your Eminence the surprise this invitation caused me. I do not recall having heard a consultation regarding a particular liturgy for this ecclesial movement. In recent days, I?ve received expressions of concern regarding papal approval, which they already knew about, from various persons, including a respected bishop in the United States. I regarded them as rumor and speculation, but now I?ve discovered they were right. As a faithful student of the teaching of the Holy Father with regard to liturgical reform, which is fundamental for the New Evangelization, I believe the approval of such liturgical innovations, even after the corrections on the part of the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, does not seem coherent with the liturgical magisterium of the pope.?

The document carried a handwritten note from Pope Benedict XVI, dated Jan. 20, which read: ?Return to Card. Bertone, inviting Card. Burke to perhaps translate these very correct observations in the Congregation for

Divine Worship.?

Events on the same day offered confirmation of Benedict?s sympathy for Burke?s concerns.

On Jan. 20, the day Benedict appended his brief note to Burke?s letter, the pope also met with leaders and members of the Neocatechumenal Way in a Vatican audience. Despite rumors that the Vatican would issue blanket approval of all the movement?s liturgical celebrations, a decree from the Pontifical Council for the Laity was read out approving only para-liturgical rites ?which do not appear by their nature to be regulated already by the liturgical books of the church.?

In his remarks to the Neocatechumenate that day, Benedict stressed the importance of ?faithfully following? the church?s liturgical rules, aside from certain ?particularizes? already approved. (Those include using unleavened bread, and receiving communion in place while standing.)

In April, respected Vatican writer Sandro Magister reported that Benedict XVI has asked the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to examine whether the Masses celebrated by the Neocatechumenate are ?in keeping with the liturgical teaching and practice of the Catholic church,? in collaboration with the Congregation for Worship and the Council for the Laity.

"The danger feared by Benedict XVI," Magister wrote, "and by many bishops ? as demonstrated by the many complaints that have been made to the Vatican ? is that the particular ways in which the Neocatechumenal communities all over the world celebrate their Masses may introduce into the Latin liturgy a new de facto 'rite' artificially composed by the founders of the Way, foreign to the liturgical tradition, full of doctrinal ambiguities and a source of division in the community of the faithful."

Another critical look at the Neocatechumenate came in August 2011 from Spanish Archbishop Alberto Bottari de Castello, in a confidential report looking back over his six-year mission as the pope?s ambassador to Japan.

The presence of the Neocatechumenate in Japan has long caused friction with the local bishops, who imposed a moratorium on their activity in 2010. At the time, Bottari launched a mediation process between the bishops and the movement.

In his report, extracts from which were published in the recent book *His Holiness: The Secret Papers of Benedict XVI* by Italian journalist Gianluigi Nuzzi, Bottari writes that the Neocatechumenate symbolizes a broad failure on the part of the Catholic church to understand Japan?s culture.

?Here, I would say, stands the controversial point and the difficulties posed by the method of the members of the Neocatechumenal Way. From what one sees, they come and apply, to the letter, a method born and prepared in Europe, without caring about adapting to the local world. I?ve found among them here in Japan the same style that I saw in Cameroon, where I was a missionary twenty years ago; the same songs (with the guitar), the same expressions, the same catechesis, all transmitted with a style based more on imposition than proposition. One can thus understand the tensions, disagreements and reactions they generate, which sometimes find them little disposed to dialogue. Their intentions are certainly admirable, their good will, but insertion in the local culture is missing. This, in my modest opinion, is what the local Japanese bishops are asking of them ? to take off the European dress in order to present the heart of the message in a purified way close to the people.?

Bottari, 69, is today the pope?s ambassador in Hungary.

Along with the new documents, *La Repubblica* also published a note, allegedly written on a computer by one of the Vatican insiders leaking the texts, which insists that the papal butler arrested in late May is merely a ?scapegoat? and that the real authors of the affair are to be found within the ?central power? of the Vatican.

The note appeared to suggest the leaks would continue, insisting the leakers have ?hundreds? of documents in their possession.

The Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, appeared resigned to seeing the revelations continue, in remarks to reporters during the pope?s weekend visit to Milan for a World Meeting of Families.

"We do not expect that the documents published so far will be the last,? Lombardi said. ?It?s clear that those who have accepted this quantity of documents will use them with their own strategies and for their own purpose, certainly not with the intention of doing everything at once and then leaving us alone.?

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