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

Christian growth in the heart of Islam; Kazakhstan; and the butler's trial

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 28, 2012 All Things Catholic

Media theorists like to talk about the power of a "narrative," meaning a storyline that's often more influential than reality in shaping perceptions. For instance, violent crime rates in the United States are at historic lows, yet popular psychology, shaped by Quentin Tarantino and "CSI," remains gripped by a narrative of pervasive danger.

{C}

Pope Benedict XVI recently returned from his fourth trip to the Middle East, where there's a strong Christian narrative these days: decline and possible extinction. Given the steep drop in the native Christian population, some fear the region will soon be a "spiritual Disneyland," full of holy sites but empty of flesh-and-blood believers.

There's certainly reality to that, yet the narrative of decline obscures an equally important truth. In some parts of the Middle East, Christianity is actually booming, and those folks deserve some attention, too.

Looking just at Catholics, seven Middle Eastern nations have seen spikes since 1980: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Yemen, all on the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi Arabia alone now contains the second-largest Catholic community in the region, conservatively estimated at 1.5 million. They're mostly so-called "guest workers," including Filipinos, Indians, Indonesians, Koreans, Nigerians, Lebanese and others, drawn by construction, manufacturing and service jobs.

This mushrooming Christian footprint in the heart of the Islamic world is arguably the most remarkable phenomenon in the global church in the 21st century, and it faces unique pastoral challenges. As long as all one sees is a Christian exodus, however, it's unlikely the church will mobilize its resources effectively to be of support.

In effect, we need a new narrative for the Middle East: not just decline, but new life, too.

To that end, I turned to Bishop Camillo Ballin, a 68-year-old Comboni missionary who serves as apostolic vicar of Northern Arabia, covering Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. An Italian, Ballin has spent his career in the Middle East, serving in Egypt, Lebanon and Sudan. He was in Lebanon for the pope's trip, and I interviewed him shortly afterward, on Sept. 20.

Allen: We hear a great deal about the decline of Christianity in the Middle East, but your local church is growing rapidly. Who are your people, where do they come from and how many are there?

Ballin: Our faithful come from Asia (the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Korea and elsewhere), from the Arabic countries and from Europe. There are now 350,000 Catholics in Kuwait; 300,000 in Qatar; 150,000 in Bahrain; and 1.5 million in Saudi Arabia, including 1.2 million Filipinos. The overall total for

Northern Arabia is 2 million Catholics. Ninety percent belong to the Latin Rite, while the remaining 10 percent belong to one of the Eastern churches.

What are the main challenges you face? What are the gifts?

The main challenges we face are:

- How to form all these people and nationalities into one Catholic church, and not many Catholic churches living alongside one another.
- How to help people in their own language. We celebrate the Mass in five rites (Latin, Malabar, Malankara, Maronite and Coptic) and in 12 different languages.
- How to assist such a large number of faithful with very limited facilities. We need much more space, but this is opposed by fundamentalist Muslims. In Kuwait, the fundamentalists declared a few months ago that not only can no new churches be built, but existing churches must be destroyed.

Our gifts include:

- Our faithful are all young, because when they reach retirement age they have to leave. Generally, they go back back to their original country or they emigrate definitively to the United States, Canada, Australia, Europe and so on. Being young, our faithful are very active. They want space for meetings, prayer services and other activities, but we have just two or three halls to serve thousands of people.
- Our faithful are generous. We're dependent on their offerings at the Masses, which are enough for the normal running of our parishes, but we can't handle any big projects.
- Religious practice among our people is very high, especially the Indians. Our Masses usually have at least 1,000 attendees, and many Masses have several thousand. In Qatar, for example, there are two weekly Masses for the Filipinos, and there are usually 3,000 people at each. This massive presence of our faithful facilitates our relations with them and encourages us in our ministry.

Is there a danger that in thinking about the church in the Middle East, we overlook the rapidly growing immigrant population?

The immigrant population deserves much more attention. Our two vicariates now have almost half of the Catholics living in the Middle East. They deserve consideration, too, even though they're not natives in these countries.

From the outside, we hear a great deal about a lack of religious freedom in Arabia. What's the reality on the ground?

We want to respect the laws of the countries we live in as well as their faith, traditions and mentality. These countries never have to be afraid of the Catholic church, because we will always respect them.

Where we live, it's generally permitted to pray in private in one's home, but it's not clear if this private prayer can include only members of the immediate family or if a group of families can meet together to pray. Some embassies welcome us for prayer, a practice known by the government and by everyone.

The day when we have even some simple halls in the main towns where we can pray without fear or the day when we can have a church there will be a glorious day for Saudi Arabia and for all the world.

What did you make of the pope's trip to Lebanon? Is there anything from it that will be of practical value to your church?

It's important to put the teachings of the pope into practice, especially communion among all the churches and all believers. In his document on the church in the Middle East, the pope wrote: "I encourage all the Catholic faithful and all priests, to whatever church they belong, to manifest sincere communion and pastoral cooperation with the local bishop." In our two vicariates, there is only one bishop in charge of all Catholics, no matter the church to which they belong. As I said above, communion is our first challenge, and the pope put great stress on unity with the local bishop.

The pope's exhortation takes everyone back to the theme of "the Catholic church in the Middle East" -- "church" in the singular, not plural. It is a strong prophetic teaching for the churches in our area.

How can Catholics in the United States be of support?

We implore Catholics everywhere to pray for our ministry in the Arabian Gulf countries, which urgently need the presence of Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist, and his grace through the other sacraments and the Gospel.

The Vicariate of Northern Arabia is a "start-up" in a vast mission territory, with huge financial needs. We plan as soon as possible to build a new cathedral church and pastoral center in Bahrain, centrally located among the four countries of the vicariate. The estimated budget for this project alone is $9 million. Our friends in the United States can make tax-deductible contributions to support the vicariate through the Comboni Missionaries, the religious order of which I am a member. Helping us is as simple as making an online donation at www.combonimissionaries.org [1], noting that it's for the Vicariate of Northern Arabia.

* * *

Last week, I reflected [2] on Benedict XVI's Lebanon trip, among other things, comparing it to John Paul II's 2001 outing to Kazakhstan. Both countries, I suggested, offer compelling examples of basic Muslim/Christian harmony.

I was mostly talking about the climate at the grassroots, rather than government policy, but since I didn't say that, it's not surprising that real experts objected I was presenting an overly rosy picture. Among the more thoughtful responses came from Forum 18, a Norwegian human rights organization that promotes religious freedom and that is especially adept at monitoring the situation in the former Soviet sphere.

Here's what an analyst at Forum 18 sent along:

> Kazakhstan's government claims it promotes religious tolerance, via such things as its well-funded so-called 'Congresses of leaders of world and traditional religions'. The reality is different, with the government promoting intolerance of people exercising their freedom of religion or belief. For instance, two new laws severely restricting religious freedom passed in October 2011 were preceded by officials and state-funded NGOs holding public meetings and media campaigns praising so-called 'traditional religions' and attacking so-called 'non-traditional religions'. An Ahmadi Muslim, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 this campaign was designed to 'prepare the public for a

> discriminatory new law'. Since the laws were passed, among other violations, Ahmadi Muslims nationwide and people from other faiths have been banned from meeting for worship. All congregations of any faith with fewer than 50 adults willing to be identified for registration purposes are banned, as are all religious communities that don't wish to seek state permission to exist.
>
> Apologists for the government try to ignore or downgrade the contradiction between allegedly promoting tolerance, and directly attacking the rule of law and fundamental human rights such as religious freedom. As Human Rights Watch, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and others have documented, the two new laws are part of wider state attempts to control society. These include the jailing of activists who lead striking oil workers, and a 2011 presidential election in which Nursultan Nazarbaev allegedly won over 95 percent of the vote on nearly 90 percent turnout.

It's a point well taken: Even if the people in a given society are largely tolerant, that doesn't mean the government necessarily gets a clean bill of health.

By the way, I'd like to credit the Forum 18 analyst by name who took the time to provide this information, but I was asked not to do so. Their policy is that if attention is going to be directed to anybody's name, it ought to be the victims of religious freedom violations, not the people who document their suffering.

In an age of insatiable PR appetites, that's fairly refreshing all by itself. Forum 18's reports and analysis can be found at www.forum18.org [3].

* * *

Tomorrow, the Vatican's "trial of the century" begins. Paolo Gabriele, the 46-year-old former butler to Pope Benedict XVI, is charged with aggravated theft for allegedly being the mole at the heart of the Vatileaks scandal. (Also on trial is another former lay Vatican employee, Claudio Sciarpelletti, who faces a more minor charge.)

Italian news agencies are reporting that among the potential witnesses are Msgr. Georg G?nswein, the pope's personal secretary, and the four consecrated women belonging to Memores Domini, part of the Communion and Liberation movement, who make up Benedict's private household. They were interviewed during the preliminary investigation, and it will apparently be up to both the prosecution and the defense to decide whether they're called to testify during the trial itself.

The $64,000 question, of course, is whether others were involved in the leaks, and if so, who are they? Whether the trial will deliver a convincing answer remains to be seen, but based on conversations with colleagues during Benedict's recent trip to Lebanon, it seems clear that most of the world's *vaticanisti* (for sure, the Italians) are convinced that the Gabriele trial -- not the Synod of Bishops for the New Evangelization, not the "Year of Faith" or anything else -- is destined to be this fall's blockbuster Vatican story.

Perhaps that explains why, even before the trial begins, a kerfuffle has broken out over who gets to cover it.

All along, Vatican officials have said the trial would be "public," meaning there would be press coverage, but until recently it wasn't clear what that meant. Last week the decision was made that a pool of eight reporters will observe the trial, which will not be broadcast live. Four places in the pool will be "fixed," meaning reserved for

a specific news agency -- The Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France Presse and an Italian outlet (TM News) -- while the other four spaces will rotate.

For the record, the decision was not made by the Vatican, but by a body known as the "International Association of Journalists Accredited to the Vatican" (AIGAV), which is basically a sort of club for reporters who cover the place.

The decision has triggered two lines of criticism. First, none of the fixed spaces went to a Spanish-language agency, even though it's the most spoken language among the 1.2 billion Catholics in the world, more than 40 percent of whom live in Latin America alone. Two spaces went to English-language agencies, AP and Reuters. To many Spanish-speakers, that can't help but seem unfair.

On another front, veteran Italian Vatican writer Salvatore Izzo blasted the choice as symptomatic of a deeper problem with the way religion is covered in the media. In a nutshell, Izzo argued that the system is kowtowing to big international agencies simply because they've got muscle despite the fact they're sometimes hostile to the church and thus, as he sees it, sloppy in their coverage.

"The same outlets are being rewarded which, for example, damaged the pope in Regensburg, in Africa with regard to AIDS, and on the pedophilia scandals," Izzo wrote, citing a letter from then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger regarding an American sex abuse case that, critics charge, was mistranslated in AP's initial coverage.

"In my opinion, this decision reveals a cultural and psychological inferiority complex towards the strongest, meaning the agencies which have the most money but not necessarily the most credibility," Izzo wrote.

Izzo also wrote that the Vatican's willingness to go along was truly "disconcerting." These pool allocations, he warned, will only encourage throwing mud at the church, "which is the true aim pursued by many media outlets and the Masons who control them."

Those charges brought a reply from another veteran Italian journalist, Salvatore Mazza, who writes for the Italian bishops' newspaper and serves as president of AIGAV.

Mazza wrote that being part of a pool "is not a reward for the most talented or the strongest, but a service, with precise rules, which colleagues render to one another when not everyone can be present."

Yet another Italian journalist, Marco Tosatti, proposed the problem could be solved by making the trial available on closed-circuit TV in the Vatican Press Office. Citing a desire not to turn the process into a "reality show," however, it appears the Vatican isn't inclined to take that step.

Aside from the question of who actually gets to sit in the courtroom -- which, believe me, will seem cool for about five minutes, and then an enormous chore for the rest of the time -- the brouhaha over the Gabriele pool touches on something else.

Over the years, reporters from Catholic outlets sometimes have complained of feeling like second-class citizens in the Vatican Press Office in comparison to the secular big boys. Catholic writers and broadcasters who are basically Vatican-friendly grouse that they're trying to help the pope, yet the Vatican doesn't give them any strokes; those who are critical sometimes charge that the Vatican is afraid of giving too much prominence to reporters who know where the bodies are buried.

Although no one from the Vatican Press Office has ever quite said this out loud, their unstated policy is that while they try to be open to everybody, their primary concern is ensuring maximum exposure for the pope's message and doing what they can to influence how the Vatican is covered by agencies which have the greatest

impact in forming popular opinion. By necessity, that means a "preferential option" for outlets whose audiences are measured in the millions rather than the thousands.

Whether that's cold-blooded PR calculus or a noble option to engage the outside world, it is what it is. In that light, one can call the pool assignments for the Gabriele trial "disconcerting," if that's how you feel about it, but hardly surprising.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondence. His email address is **jallen@ncronline.org**.]

Source URL (retrieved on *02/10/2016 - 23:59*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/christian-growth-heart-islam-kazakhstan-and-butlers-trial

Links:
[1] http://www.combonimissionaries.org
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/32306
[3] http:// www.forum18.org