

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 10, 2014 at 9:33am

The clergy trade; Melady; pope-watch; and The Boston Globe

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Pope Francis recently issued a blunt warning about what he called a "novice trade" within religious orders these days, quoting a line from the Filipino bishops and deliberately using an Italian term that evokes memories of the slave trade. The comment came during a late November session with superiors of religious orders, extensive extracts from which were released Jan. 2.

Here's the relevant portion as captured by Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor of the journal *Civiltà Cattolica*, who was present for the session with superiors:

"Pope Francis is certainly aware of the risks, even in terms of 'vocational recruitment,' by younger churches. He recalled, inter alia, that, in 1994, in the context of the Ordinary Synod on Consecrated Life and the Missions, the Filipino bishops criticized the 'novice trade,' i.e., massive arrival of foreign congregations who were opening houses in the archipelago with an eye toward recruiting vocations to be transplanted to Europe. 'We need to keep an eye open for such situations,' the pope said."

In context, the pope's reference appeared to be to situations in which religious men and women from impoverished nations are subjected to various forms of exploitation or abuse or are viewed largely as a source of manual labor for diminishing Western congregations.

Such situations, however, are only a small piece of a much bigger picture, which is a growing migration of priests and religious in the Catholic church from the "global south" to the north, despite the fact that the overall Catholic population is shifting in precisely the opposite direction. Two-thirds of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics today live in the Southern hemisphere, but almost two-thirds of the church's 412,000 priests are in the West.

Those imbalances seem destined to expand, given increasing reliance in Europe and North America on clergy from abroad. Roughly one in five Catholic priests in the United States today is foreign-born, and around 300 new international priests arrive in the country every year.

To discuss the promise and peril of this broader "trade" in clergy, I turned to Philip Jenkins of Baylor University, one of the English-speaking world's leading experts on global Christianity. I spoke to him by phone Tuesday.

By way of background, Jenkins warned more than a decade ago that Catholicism seemed to be drifting into a policy of siphoning off the best and brightest personnel from churches in the developing world to plug holes in the West, which he called potentially "suicidal for Catholic fortunes."

***Allen:* Is there such a thing as a "novice trade"?**

Jenkins: Yes, clearly. It's well-documented, and it tends to be an issue particularly with the Philippines, India and some parts of Africa, although most of the scandals I have seen have focused on Asians. It's a consequence of the changing demographics of so many religious congregations. These novices tend to be young, and in some cases, they end up basically in domestic labor, especially in Italy. I don't have any sense, however, of the scale of this trade.

There's a difference between these situations and the broader movement of clergy from South to North, because with these novices in some cases we're almost talking about an illegal immigration operation within the church.

Advertisement

What's the greatest problem with it?

One watchword of Francis' papacy is the relationship between the periphery and the center. He's saying that the church should reach out to the periphery and embrace it. This novice trade is a classic example of the center exploiting the periphery, and it violates all the principles Francis has laid out. It's a question of the church setting its own house in order before it can speak credibly to the rest of the world, especially on issues such as immigration.

Aside from situations of abuse, you've said in the past that even voluntary movement of clergy from South to North is worrying. Here's what you wrote in 2002: "Viewed in a global perspective, such a policy can be described at best as painfully short-sighted, at worst as suicidal for Catholic fortunes." Do you stand by that?

Absolutely, because the numerical gap between North and South has grown even more dramatic.

Around the world, one of the largest reasons for the decline of Catholic congregations is when they don't have access to adequate numbers of clergy, whether we're dealing with priests or with religious who do so

much of the crucial work, such as education. It's a function of available personnel. In Europe, those shortages are famously an ongoing crisis. In Latin America, what they lead to is the growth of Protestant congregations that fill the void. So far, this hasn't happened yet in a place like the Philippines, where the Catholic church has been clever in adopting strategies to stave off the Protestant congregations. But if they end up losing priests and religious because they're being siphoned off by the West, it could potentially weaken what is right now one of the world's strongest Catholic churches.

It should be said that this often happens with the best of intentions. I've seen cases with various American churches, not just Catholic, where they've drawn very talented clergy from Africa because they want to give them opportunities and assist their professional development. Yet by definition, if the best clergy from these churches are being skimmed off, it inevitably contributes to a drain.

It's not like these people are being forced to relocate. Should the church be prohibiting priests who want to work in the West from having that chance?

You're right, it's entirely voluntary. It's actually a very close parallel to what happens with skilled technical experts and professionals around the world. What often happens is that these people come over thinking they'll be here for a couple of years, and 20 years later, they say to themselves, "Maybe I'm not going back." It's part of a larger secular phenomenon. For instance, right now, the Israelis are worried that so many of their best technical people are being drained off to the States. The church is hardly alone in facing this problem.

I wouldn't want to see a system where Northern churches introduce firm barriers against immigrant labor. What's needed is a balance between the reasonable use of people who want to come to the West against the risk of draining the best and brightest from local churches in other parts of the world.

If you were an American Catholic bishop these days, what would your policy be on foreign priests?

I think I would spend a lot of time talking to bishops and other leaders in the places where these priests are coming from, which in the States often means Nigeria, asking what they think is a reasonable compromise. I'd look for their wisdom. If they have the people and can spare them, and if we can come up with some kind of compensation, perhaps that's a good working agreement.

You mention a bishop being able to "spare" priests. Isn't it the case that whether or not those priests are needed at home, sometimes bishops in the developing world send them abroad because they're a revenue stream?

Yes, very much so. When you look at any global denomination these days, one thing that emerges very forcibly is the massive imbalance between North and South in terms of money and means. In the South, you talk to bishops whose clergy haven't been paid in six months. It's a completely different world.

In Christianity generally, what we're dealing with is a world with the wealth in the North and the people in the South. That's a bit of an extreme statement, because North and South are not divided by a great global wall, but there's still a lot of truth to it.

Would the ideal be for bishops from the South to send priests abroad for sound pastoral reasons and not out of desperation?

Absolutely, yes. There are no easy answers, and rigid policies in either direction could make things worse. For instance, we don't need a policy that says, "No Africans need apply!"

On the positive side of the ledger, do foreign priests help introduce Catholics in Europe and the States to the realities of living in a global church?

They certainly can, and in my experience, ordinary parishioners are generally very happy and very impressed with these priests. On the other hand, there's also a risk of a new divide between clergy and laity based on ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences. I've heard of cases, for instance, in which a Nigerian pastor may have very different expectations of how a parish should work than his American congregation.

There's something else we should think about, which is the impact of growing reliance on foreign clergy on vocational recruitment. I'm imagining a world, for instance, in which a young Catholic man in the States might think, "I can't be a priest, I'm not Nigerian." We can't just look at this from the point of view of Vatican policy or the bishops, but also the experience of people on the ground.

Christians in the developing world sometimes defend the movement of clergy from South to North on the basis of what's called the "reverse mission." The idea is that their churches were established by missionaries from the North, and now it's their turn to return the favor, helping to relight the fires of the church in the secular West. What do you make of that?

There's certainly something to it, but on the other hand, I would hate to see a situation in which a "reverse mission" ends up not so much strengthening the church in the North as weakening churches in the South. A prime example of that is Latin America, where extreme shortages of clergy are the largest single reason for the growth of Protestantism. Nobody ever advocated a model of mission based on strengthening the target churches at the expense of the churches back home.

Take the Philippines, which has a very vibrant, strong Catholic church. Yet European-style demographic patterns are starting to hit there, too, with a striking collapse of fertility rates. Right now, their fertility is just above replacement level, and will soon be below. We're not there yet, but the idea that you'll have all these extra sons around who are candidates for the priesthood forever is changing.

Often those declines are associated with a wave of secularization a decade or two down the road. Even the Philippines, therefore, should not feel infinitely confident about its ability to export valuable people without taking a hit. In some ways, what's taking shape in the Philippines is parallel to what's already happened in Brazil, another one of the world's largest Catholic countries. What it illustrates is the importance of not weakening these churches by siphoning off their best people.

* * *

I was saddened to hear on Monday of the death of Tom Melady after a battle with brain cancer. Tom served the original Bush administration as the U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, and I knew him not only as a newsmaker and source but as a personal friend, along with his wife, Margaret.

Others have written glowing tributes to Tom, all of them deserved. Here I'll make only two quick points.

First, Tom was that rare personality who reaches lofty perches without succumbing to the temptation to see his relationships in functional terms, i.e., what he could get out of them. He genuinely cared about the people he met over the years and took satisfaction in promoting their success. In a sense, he was a Pope Francis Catholic *ante litteram* because he represented the opposite of a "throwaway culture." For Tom, friends were never commodities to be dumped when they were no longer productive, and his example will stay with me.

Second, in an incredibly polarized era, Tom was a man of the center. He brought together left and right both inside and outside the church, seeing it as his mission to bridge divides. If there's an American Catholic outfit somewhere preparing to launch an effort to promote friendship in the church -- which is what we really need, far more than formal programs of dialogue -- they could do worse than calling it the "Melady Project."

Requiescat in pace, Tom, you will be missed.

* * *

Now for five brief notes from the pope-watch.

First, French President François Hollande is scheduled for a tête-à-tête with Pope Francis in the Vatican on Jan. 24. It's being widely styled as yet another confirmation of the "Francis effect," since the socialist Hollande has made four previous trips to Rome since taking office in May 2012 without bothering to schedule a session with the pope. Now that polls show Hollande as the least popular French president in modern history, however, the prospect of basking in some of Francis' reflected glory must seem awfully attractive. While the Hollande government and Francis may share some commonalities on economic policy and the environment, Hollande also has supported the legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide and backed gay marriage over the opposition of the French bishops.

Second, Vatican officials have said repeatedly that their efforts at financial reform aren't intended just to avoid scandals in Rome, but also to set an example for the whole church. The urgency of that example has a fresh illustration these days in the burgeoning Italian soap opera around financier Paolo Oliverio, currently in jail facing charges of various forms of corruption. One such scheme, which came to light in November, involved illegally detaining two Camillian priests so they couldn't vote in the order's general chapter, ensuring that the incumbent superior, Fr. Renato Salvatore, was re-elected. Allegedly, Salvatore was one of Oliverio's behind-the-scenes confederates, allowing him to use accounts controlled by the order to move money around and to disguise its origins. This week, investigators revealed that Salvatore apparently had a cluster of secret files in his possession given to him by Oliverio for safekeeping, including some allegedly concerning the infamous Italian Masonic network P3, and that at least \$13 million had disappeared at Oliverio's direction from a hospital operated by the Camillians in southern Italy.

Third, the Italian debate over civil unions is heating up after the new leader of the country's center-left Democratic Party expressed support for it. Now that the dust has settled from the silliness over whether Francis' innocent recent line on educating kids of gay couples represented an "opening" to same-sex unions, the real question is coming into focus: In the Francis era, how politically active will the church be in fighting back? One interesting observation comes from Agostino Giovagnoli, an expert on church/state relations at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. In his eyes, the shift under Francis isn't doctrinal but pastoral. Giovagnoli wrote Thursday that under this pope, bishops will no longer see themselves as "part of the ruling class, in close relationship with other elements of the ruling class," but rather as "the voice of the people for their faithful, and indirectly, for the entire Italian people." In that connection, he suggests,

bishops may be less invested in influencing the course of political debates and more in retail-level pastoral concerns. If so, Giovagnoli says, it won't have implications only for Italy, but everywhere Catholic bishops are currently identified with specific political causes -- citing specifically the United States.

Fourth, the new Jerzy Kluger will be in Rome in mid-January. Kluger, who died on New Year's Eve in 2011, was a Polish Jew and close personal friend of John Paul II who became an important back-channel figure in Catholic/Jewish relations during the JP II years. Today, Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka, a good friend of Jorge Mario Bergoglio who co-authored a book with the future pope, occupies much the same position. He'll be in Rome for a reunion with Francis on Jan. 16, and that afternoon, he'll give a public lecture at the Jesuit-run Gregorian University followed by a press conference with Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch, who heads the Vatican department for ecumenism and also relations with Jews. The subject of the lecture is "Jewish-Catholic Dialogue Fifty Years after *Nostra Aetate*," referring to the document of the Second Vatican Council on Jewish/Catholic relations. Watch the *NCR Today* blog for my coverage of the event.

Fifth, the Legionaries of Christ opened their keenly anticipated general chapter meeting on Wednesday, designed to mark the formal end of three years of papal receivership. The chapter is supposed to adopt a new set of constitutions for the order and to elect new leadership. Given the Legionaries' image as the leading symbol of the church's sexual abuse scandals, the outcome of the general chapter will be closely scrutinized as an index of whether reform on Francis' watch will be real. I'll be in Rome beginning Jan. 16, in part to cover the chapter meeting, so pay attention to the *NCR Today* blog on this score, too.

* * *

By now, All Things Catholic readers may have seen the news that I will be leaving the *National Catholic Reporter* on Feb. 1 to take a new position as associate editor with *The Boston Globe*. Primarily, I'll be doing the same reporting and analysis I've always done, but I'll also be helping the *Globe* ramp up its overall Catholic coverage.

One footnote in response to a question some have asked: I won't be moving to Boston but will continue to divide my year among Rome, Denver, and road trips for reporting and speaking gigs.

Three other quick things I'd like to say here.

First, I am inexpressibly grateful to the *National Catholic Reporter* not only for the classy way they've handled this transition, but for 16 years of unfailing support both professionally and personally. *NCR* will continue to be a go-to destination for reporting and analysis on the Catholic beat, and while I'll no longer be writing for the paper, I will certainly be among its most avid readers. I want to take this chance to encourage All Things Catholic readers to do the same, even if as of Feb. 1, you'll have to go to the *Globe* to get my own stuff.

In the meantime, I'm still in the saddle for *NCR* until the end of January, and I'm going to try to make the most of my last couple of weeks on the paper's payroll in Rome.

Second, I did a quick interview with the Catholic News Agency on Wednesday in which I said I hope our project at the *Globe* will offer an example of how to get coverage of the church right in a major secular news outlet. While getting the story right is obviously the idea, in retrospect, I can see how the comment rankled with people who have been doing precisely that for a long time and hardly need me to show the way.

I apologize if anyone felt what I said was a slight to their work because that's certainly not what I had in mind.

There are many talented reporters on the religion beat and many news organizations with a proud record of groundbreaking religion coverage -- including, of course, the *Globe* itself, long before I got there. My modest hope is to add to the good work that's being done rather than blazing a trail where no one's ever gone before.

Third, when the *Globe* and *NCR* announced my move on Tuesday, it occasioned a wide range of reactions. I want to thank everyone who called, emailed, tweeted, etc., to express congratulations and best wishes, even if I haven't had the time to respond personally.

I also want to acknowledge what I consider hands down the best one-liner.

By way of background, the new owner of the *Globe* is John Henry, who also owns the Boston Red Sox. If you're not a baseball fan, one of the team's best-known players is second baseman Dustin Pedroia, a former American League MVP who signed a \$110 million contract extension back in July.

Thus it was that when news of my move to the *Globe* broke, Ross Douthat of *The New York Times* dispatched the following tweet:

The smartest use of John Henry's money since he locked up Pedroia: <http://t.co/ritraLSQvn>
? Ross Douthat (@DouthatNYT) January 7, 2014

Thanks, Ross. Here's hoping I deliver on the pages of the *Globe* even half as well as Pedroia does on the field.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time an All Things Catholic column is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.

Source URL (retrieved on 06/20/2018 - 12:21pm): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/clergy-trade-melady-pope-watch-and-boston-globe>

Links:

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/node/160616>