

The current predicament of European Catholicism

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 13, 2009 All Things Catholic

I was in Ireland this week, delivering the inaugural lecture sponsored by the *Irish Catholic* newspaper on Wednesday night in Dublin. The subject was, "Christianity and Europe: Pope Benedict's vision and the question of European integration."

From the outside, it may seem a curious theme to invite an American to address. It didn't take long on Irish soil, to grasp the logic: The European Union is a deeply contentious issue here, and thus it seemed safer to my hosts to tap someone not clearly identified either with the pro-EU or "Euro-skeptic" line. This was all the more relevant, I suspect, because the *Irish Catholic*, the country's lone nationally circulated Catholic paper and my host this week, has a broadly pro-EU editorial line.

In the wake of my experience, here's an off-the-cuff observation about Catholic culture on the two sides of the Atlantic: In some ways, the debate over the EU plays the role here that abortion does in the States, as the most polarizing question in Catholic life. Of course, the two issues are not completely unrelated, since much Catholic skepticism about the EU is fueled by fear that liberal social policies might be imposed through the bureaucratic back door of European regulations or court decisions. In any event, one has the impression that much conservative Catholic energy in Europe, which in the States would be funneled into the pro-life movement, is consumed here by anti-EU campaigns.

Reflecting the passions people feel, an overflow crowd assembled at Dublin's Davenport Hotel for the lecture on Wednesday, despite the fact that Ireland's national soccer team was playing a World Cup qualifier match that night. I don't know if I've ever spoken to a more heterogeneous crowd, at least in terms of the range of Catholic temperaments represented. The group included ultra-traditionalists and ferocious opponents of big government (one woman, for example, slipped me a small notebook filled with hand-copied scriptural "proofs" that the Treaty of Lisbon will trigger the reign of the anti-Christ), along with members of the liberal reform group "We Are Church," priests of both the Legionaries of Christ and Opus Dei, moderate-to-progressive pro-EU Catholics, and every point of the compass in between.

As I said on Wednesday, we certainly have these constituencies in American Catholicism too, but rarely do we get them all into the same room.

Q&A at the Davenport occasionally turned a bit raucous (it's Ireland, after all), but the evening offered an object lesson in the church's diversity -- as well as a reminder of how hard Catholicism has to work to remain one family of faith, rather than a cluster of competing ideological and theological tribes, defined more by our

political differences than our shared spiritual convictions.

Below, I offer a few excerpts from my remarks on Wednesday evening.

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I am of course aware that the good people at the *Irish Catholic* have asked me to address the subject of "Christianity and Europe" not as an American, but as a writer on Vatican affairs. Nonetheless, I cannot help seeing our subject partly through American eyes, and I confess that doing so has brought me a fair bit of amusement -- though I warn you in advance that you may not find it quite so funny.

In preparing for this lecture, I consulted with contacts I've made in Europe over the years. ? These are thoughtful people who are both fully Catholic and fully European, and many told me that they are experiencing a growing tension between those two elements of their identity.

What I've heard is that, on the side of the new Europe, the elite makers of culture are sometimes openly hostile to Catholics, treating them almost as a foreign body. The Rocco Buttiglione episode is merely the best known example of a spreading "No Catholics Need Apply" mentality in some secular circles. On the side of the Church, meanwhile, some worry that the Vatican sees things only in the most negative terms, and tends to view Catholics working to articulate the faith in Europe's new cultural milieu -- working, in other words, to find a new way of being Catholic on a changing continent, one marked by considerable religious and ethical pluralism -- with suspicion, as if these pioneers somehow risk betraying the teaching and tradition of the Church.

I have listened to these voices carefully, and as an American, my instinctive reply cannot help but be: "Welcome to our world."

What I mean is this: With allowances for the obvious historical differences, all of the above could have been said, and certainly was said, of Catholicism in the United States at various points in our history. During the 19th century, our own elite makers of culture -- who were not secularists, but rather Protestants -- also hung out "No Catholics Need Apply" signs, and generally abhorred Catholicism as a foreign presence in America's body politic. At the same time, those American Catholics who attempted to craft a form of Catholicism that could be at home in the competitive religious marketplace of the United States, one that could do justice to the country's multi-faith and democratic ethos, were viewed with deep suspicion in Rome.

The mischievous corner of my soul thus takes delight in the current predicament of European Catholicism, because, for once, we American Catholics can play the senior partner in a conversation with our European brothers and sisters.

Here's the good news: In the short space of a century, the standing of American Catholicism, both in Rome and among our fellow citizens, has improved considerably. Consider that in 1899, Pope Leo XIII essentially invented a heresy called "Americanism" in order to condemn those Catholics in the United States who defended our form of separation of church and state, indirectly suggesting that we ought to be more "European." In 2008, meanwhile, Pope Benedict XVI travelled to our shores to deliver a tribute to the American approach to church/state relations, arguing that in the United States the "wall of separation" between church and state means freedom *for* religion, while *laïcité* in Europe often means freedom *from* religion. In effect, Benedict expressed a certain longing that Europe should be more like us!

Of course, I am not suggesting that European Catholicism should look across the Atlantic to find a model for its own way forward. Our histories and cultures are too different to simply transplant strategies from one continent to the other; and in any event, there are important aspects of American Catholicism that are still very much a work in progress. Rather, my point is that, from a historical point of view, a new culture is emerging in Europe today, with new legal and political institutions and a new set of values, and it is hardly surprising that Catholicism is struggling to adapt. If there is a lesson to be learned from the path that American Catholicism has walked over the last century, it is that efforts to express the faith in a new world often initially generate tumult and alarm, but can eventually come to be seen as a gift to the universal Church.

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I then sketched four "pillars" of the thinking of Benedict XVI personally, as well as the Vatican corporately, with regard to the process of European integration.

Pillar One: The Importance of Europe

In the abstract, a hypothetical sociologist from another planet might wonder why Benedict XVI bothers about Europe at all. He seems to have soured on what some derisively call the "ecclesiastical winter" in Europe, not to mention a cluster of social currents such as declining fertility rates and growing acceptance of alternative forms of the family. In any event, Europe accounts for an ever-shrinking share of the overall Catholic population.

The banal answer as to why Benedict XVI does not simply "cash out," of course, is because he is himself European, because his intellectual and personal formation are inextricably linked to European history and culture, because he has written widely over the course of a lifetime on European affairs, and because, frankly, at the age of 81, it is far too late for him to shed this particular skin.

All this is true so far as it goes, but it does not cut to the heart of the matter. More deeply, the Holy Father is profoundly convinced that Christianity's relationship with Europe is not simply an accident of history but rather part of the divine plan, a constitutive element of *Heilsgeschichte* -- the unfolding of God's logic of salvation through time. ... If three centuries of Hellenistic influence cannot simply be thrown aside, more than a millennium of Christian development that bears the imprint of Europe is even more integrally tied to the culture of Catholicism. Benedict XVI may not quite go so far as Hilaire Belloc in claiming that "Europe is the faith," but he would certainly concur that the faith is inextricably linked to Europe. The Holy Father believes that

Christianity cannot renounce Europe without renouncing itself.

If I may be forgiven for paraphrasing the language often used by pundits and politicians to justify bailouts of major corporations in my country, Benedict XVI believes that Europe is simply "too big to fail."

Pillar Two: Support for Integration

In broad strokes, both Benedict XVI personally and the Vatican corporately support the project of European integration, which is nothing more than a concrete application of the universality and consequent relativization of national identity that is of the essence of Catholicism.

All this creates a context in which basic support for European integration is simply part of the "DNA," so to speak, of the Vatican. To translate this point into political language, one could say that the Vatican is certainly not a "Euro-skeptic." That is not to say, of course, that there aren't many points concerning the direction of the European Union about which the pope and his lieutenants are indeed skeptical, with the failure to mention God in the preamble to the draft constitutional document being only the most well-known example.

Within this essentially positive framework, there are two points in particular which both recent popes and the Vatican's diplomatic corps have stressed.

The first is the need for generosity towards the nations of the East, reflecting a vision of Europe stretching "from the Atlantic to the Urals." The second is the insistence of Benedict XVI and the Holy See that religious bodies -- what we in America would call "faith-based groups" -- must have a seat at the table in the new European institutions. This is a specific instance of a broader argument from Benedict XVI, which is the danger of exiling faith from public life, as if religious commitment were a purely private affair with no consequences for politics or culture. Instead, Benedict has repeatedly argued, democratic institutions rely upon an infusion of values which democracies themselves cannot generate.

Pillar Three: Christianity Identity of and in Europe

Here we arrive at what, in church-speak, we would call the "neuralgic" point: the insistence of Benedict XVI, like John Paul II before him, that Europe not sacrifice its Christian identity upon the altar of tolerance and multiculturalism. This, as we say, is where the rubber meets the road in terms of competing visions of what an integrated Europe ought to look like.

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a bedrock conviction of Benedict XVI and senior Catholic officials that an integrated Europe must be based on an open market or an arrangement for mutual defense; it must in the first place be a market that those values ultimately rest upon the Christian foundations of Europe.

You will note, however, that I carefully titled this section "Christianity identity *of* and *in* Europe." The use of the dual prepositions reflects perhaps the most significant contrast between John Paul II and Benedict XVI with regard to Europe. John Paul aspired to move history in the here-and-now, to reclaim Europe for Christ; Benedict is a bit more of a realist. As a consummate student of modern trajectories in European culture, Benedict does not harbor the same lively sensation that consensus around Christianity identity in Europe is a likely prospect in the short term.

As a result, while Benedict certainly continues to make the argument that Christian values ought to play a role in shaping public policy and European institutions, he is more focused on fostering a robust sense of identity within the Church itself: hence Christianity identity "in" Europe, not merely "of" Europe. In fact, I have argued elsewhere that the dominant "mega-trend" at the policy-setting level of the Church today is what I have termed "Evangelical Catholicism," meaning a strong affirmation of traditional Catholic identity -- traditional markers of Catholic thought, speech and practice, such as Mass in Latin, Marian devotions, and the wearing of habits and Roman collars -- understood as a personal choice rather than as something one imbibes from homogenous Catholic cultures. Benedict XVI has referred to this project as coming to see Christianity, in language he borrows from Toynbee, as a "creative minority" -- no longer a culture-shaping majority, but rather a distinct presence with a strong sense of its own identity which can act as a leaven within the broader society, infusing it with a new sense of moral purpose.

To put all this into a sound-bite, John Paul's top priority for Europe was for the Church to influence culture; Benedict's is rather to influence the culture of the Church first, and then to bring that to bear on the broader society.

Pillar Four: Europe's Role in the World

Historically, Vatican diplomats have long encouraged the project of European integration, in part because they have seen a unified Europe as a "third way" in global affairs, positioned between the United States and whatever other major ideological competitor is on the horizon -- Soviet Communism during the Cold War, Jihadist Islam today. The idea has been that a Europe with a common foreign policy and defense strategy could project a different face of the West on the global stage, more humanitarian and multi-lateral than the perceived militarism and arrogance of America's interventions abroad.

Some of the wind has gone out of the sails of this vision, related both to souring attitudes within the Vatican about the cultural direction of Europe, and, in the meantime, the election of a new President of the United States whose approach to foreign policy seems, well, almost "European" in its soft touch.

Nonetheless, Benedict XVI and the Holy See nevertheless do still look favorably upon the emergence of the European Union as significant player on the global stage, believing that on a number of issues, the EU is more likely to align with the Church than the American White House, regardless of who happens to occupy it at given moment. Such concerns include disarmament, an absolute commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes, the ethics of free-market global capitalism, the abolition of the death penalty, strong protections for the environment and for labor, and a cluster of other issues.

For all these reasons too, one can expect that despite the vicissitudes of current events, over the long run Benedict XVI and the Holy See will remain basically favorable toward the project of building an integrated Europe, if not always the particular political instruments to which that project is attached.

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I closed along these lines:

If the Church is to articulate a coherent and constructive response to Europe's new realities, or to anything else for that matter, there is a preliminary bit of business to which we must attend. Before Catholicism can foster the unity of Europe, or of the broader human family, we must first do a better job of being unified among ourselves. The new questions being asked in the 21st century are extraordinarily complex, and there is obviously more than one Catholic opinion about how we ought to respond. If we fall back into the familiar patterns which have characterized our internal life in the 50 years since the Second Vatican Council -- of fractures between left and right, between *ad intra* interests and *ad extra*, between the hierarchy and the base, between the *avant-garde* and the defenders of tradition, between what Jacques Maritain once rather colorfully termed the "Sheep of Panurge" and the "Ruminators of the Holy Alliance" -- we run the risk of paralysis, of serious new fractures and new heartache, which will make it impossible to articulate a compelling response to this changing world.

Preventing this from happening will require energy and imagination, and it's not primarily a task for our hierarchy or our theological guild, though obviously it has to be fleshed out in collaboration with both. In the first place, however, it's a work for all us, because what it requires is not new policies or structures but rather *metanoia* -- a change of heart, a willingness to think beyond the sterile ideological battles of the past and to embrace the great Catholic passion for synthesis.

Do that, it seems to me, and the rest will follow.

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