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A global case for good government in the church

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 25, 2010 All Things Catholic

Especially in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis, many Catholics in Europe and the States have come to see the push for good government in the church, featuring greater accountability and transparency, in roughly the same way that Catholics in the late 1960s saw *aggiornamento* -- something obviously to be desired, even if no two people define it quite the same way.

Yet today we live in an increasingly global church, in which Europe and America no longer set the tone all by themselves. Whether Catholicism in the 21st century embraces accountability with the same passion it once felt for *aggiornamento*, therefore, may turn on whether Catholics outside the West find their own reasons for doing so.

In a speech in Philadelphia on Thursday for the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, I suggested that a quick look around the Catholic map suggests the global case for good church governance is actually quite strong. I laid the argument out in a premise, two observations, and a thesis, which I?ll summarize here.

First, the premise: Accountability, collaboration and transparency are good things, and it would be helpful to see them take deeper root in Catholicism. In fact, I suggested that alongside the traditional ?theological? and ?cardinal? virtues, perhaps we could use a formal set of ?stewardship? virtues. If there were such a list, accountability, collaboration and transparency would almost certainly be on it.

Now, two observations.

First: When American Catholics make the case for these virtues, they typically do so by invoking American and, more broadly, Western points of reference. The two usual touchstones are the theology of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) as it?s been elaborated in American pastoral practice for the last fifty years, and the sexual abuse crisis. Those are perfectly valid points of departure, but they don?t always come so naturally to Catholics in other parts of the world.

Second: It will be difficult to make a case for anything in the Catholicism of the 21st century relying primarily on Western perspectives, for the obvious reason that the last hundred years witnessed a dramatic sea change in Catholic demography. Just a century ago, 75 percent of the Catholics in the world lived in Europe and North America; by mid-century, 75 percent will live in the global South, meaning Africa, Latin America, and Asia. To underscore that point, the 67 million Catholics in the United States today represent just six percent of the global Catholic population of 1.1 billion.

In the century to come, places such as Jakarta, Manila, Buenos Aires and Abuja will be what Paris, Leuven and Milan were to the 16th century, meaning the leading centers of new theological debate, new pastoral imagination, and new political energy.

All that sets the deck for my thesis: If Catholicism becomes more accountable, collaborative and transparent in

the 21st century, it will be because the argument was crafted in terms that speak to the experience of the global church.

What would crafting the argument in those terms look like? I offered three examples, from three different parts of the world.

The Holy Land: Christianity in the Middle East is on life support, having fallen from twenty percent of the region?s population a century ago to somewhere around three percent today. Christians in the region face a lethal cocktail composed of four forces: 1) the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, 2) the rise of Islamic radicalism, 3) economic stagnation, and 4) the fact that Christians have access to networks of Western support and therefore have more opportunities to leave. Some analysts believe there?s a realistic possibility that Christianity could disappear as a socially significant presence in the land of its birth.

In that context, accountable and transparent modes of management aren?t just about realizing the theology of Vatican II, or being good stewards ? it?s a survival strategy. If the church squanders its resources through mismanagement or corruption, or if Western donors turn off the spigot because of concerns that resources won?t be used responsibility, the current death spiral of the church in the region could become irreversible.

That would appear to be the logic behind paragraph 31 of the *Instrumentum Laboris*, or working document, for the upcoming Synod of Bishops on the Middle East in October in Rome. That paragraph reads: ?In keeping with the Gospel?s teaching on justice, the Church is to manage her patrimony in a transparent manner. Priests and bishops in particular must clearly make the distinction between what is given them for their personal use from what belongs to the Church. Furthermore, the Church?s patrimonial holdings should be preserved in order to help safeguard the Christian presence in the Middle East.?

Sub-Saharan Africa: When you ask African bishops to identify their top social priority, the answer is often not what many Westerners might expect. They usually don?t begin with HIV/AIDS, or the arms trade, or debt relief, even though they?re all important concerns. Instead, they usually start with the struggle against corruption, because they see it as the deadliest cancer afflicting their societies.

According to the United Nations, the global price-tag for corruption every year comes to $1.6 trillion, well more than the combined annual amount of foreign aid that flows from the developed to the developing world. A growing swath of Africans believe that the United Nations could fully fund the Millennium Development Goals, and that international trading relationships could be fundamentally reformed to create a level playing field, and none of that would make any difference if African societies don?t first get corruption under control.

The U.N. also talks about a ?400 percent governance dividend,? meaning that societies which foster the rule of law and effectively combat corruption can see living standards rise four-fold. There?s no other anti-poverty program on the planet, no humanitarian program, which has that kind of a payoff.

As a result, many African bishops, clergy, theologians and lay activists see their top social priority as raising a new generation of ethically sensitive African leaders, inclined to think in terms of the common good rather than enriching themselves, their political allies, and their clan.

All this is creating a ?push/pull? dynamic within the African church, because as leaders push their societies to fight corruption, they?re also pulled to adopt the same strategies within the church. Catholic leaders cannot effectively mount an anti-corruption campaign in the broader society if they?re perceived as unaccountable and non-transparent themselves. To put the point in a more positive fashion, a growing number of African bishops and other Catholic leaders want the church to model the governance practices they?re proposing to the broader culture.

India: India is clearly positioned to become an important pole in a new multi-polar global system, and in many ways Catholicism in India is one of the church?s most compelling ?good news? stories. During the 20th century the Catholic population grew from less than two million to 17 million, and is projected to be almost 30 million by mid-century. That would make India among the top five Catholic countries in the world in which English is a dominant language. By 2050, there could be more English-speaking Catholics in India than in the U.K., Ireland, Canada and Australia combined.

A special point of pride about Catholicism in India is that the church is disproportionately composed of *dalits*, or ?untouchables,? meaning the permanent under-class of the Indian caste system. The *dalits* often see choosing a non-Hindu religion as a means of rejecting oppression, and are inclined towards Catholicism because of the church?s long history of providing education, health care, and other social services. *Dalits* account for somewhere between 60 and 75 percent of the total Catholic population in India.

Yet Christianity in India is also increasingly menaced by the rise of aggressive Hindu nationalism. Radical Hindu movements often claim that Christians engage in duplicitous missionary practices in an effort to ?Christianize? India. Though by most accounts the Hindu nationalists represent a tiny fraction of the population, they have the capacity to create tremendous grief. Organized radical groups sometimes move into Christian villages, preaching a gospel of *Hindutva*, or Hindu nationalism, and urge people to take part in ?reconversion? ceremonies.

Sometimes these tensions turn violent. In 2006, for example, Archbishop Bernard Moras of Bangalore and two priests were attacked by a mob in Jalahally, 10 miles south of Bangalore. The three clerics had come to inspect the scene after St. Thomas Church and St. Claret School in Jalhally had been sacked by Hindu nationalists.

The core of the anti-Christian propaganda spread by Hindu radicals is that Christianity in India ?buys? its converts, a charge encoded in the derisive term ?rice Christian.? The assertion is that Christianity is growing through aggressive proselytism and deceit, an idea sometimes wrapped in conspiracy theories about Western interests trying to control India by weakening its religious traditions.

In that context, the ability of Catholic leaders to offer a credible, transparent account of what resources they have available, and how they?re used, is a matter of self-defense. The only way to disarm the church?s critics (at least, the best way) is to be so accountable as to make suggestions to the contrary impossible to believe.

One could point to other parts of the Catholic world, but these three examples suffice to make the point: The 21st century could well create a ?boom market? for movements seeking to foster greater accountability, collaboration and transparency in the church, if activists and entrepreneurs understand how to make the pitch in a global key.

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The National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, by the way, is a striking player on the American Catholic stage for at least a couple of reasons.

One is the impressive quality of people the group manages to bring together. On Thursday morning, a panel of board members reviewing the roundtable?s activity for the past year included Tom Healey, Assistant Treasury Secretary in the Reagan administration, and Charles (?Chuck?) Geschke, co-founder of Adobe. When heavy-hitters like that talk about how the ?best practices? of the public and private sectors might be applied to the church, people tend to listen.

Another striking feature about the group is that it?s one of the few venues where Catholics who inhabit different

?tribes? in the church rub shoulders. At an opening reception Wednesday night, for example, I bumped into a couple who had been among the founding members of Voice of the Faithful in Boston, and then shared snacks with a couple of members of Opus Dei, one currently living in Italy and the other in Spain. There were Republicans and Democrats, self-described liberals and conservatives, people who work inside the institutional church and others who definitely pitch their tents on the outside.

According to executive director Kerry Robinson, the secret is that good management basically isn?t ideological. As a result, a common desire to see the church run well has a chance to supplant, at least briefly, the hot-button debates that usually drive Catholics apart.

That?s not to say, of course, that the roundtable plays to universally positive reviews -? in the wild complexity of American Catholicism, nothing and no one does. Still, its capacity to unite a high-octane, and highly diverse, cross-section of Catholics is fairly unique in this divided and polarized time. Perhaps that, too, could be among the ?best practices? in the church the group tries to promote.

The web site of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management is http://www.nlrcm.org.

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