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We're all in the same boat

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 22, 2009 All Things Catholic

Whenever an aging prelate pipes up on some controversial issue, he generally draws one of two reactions. Those who disagree will say, "This guy's an anachronism who doesn't realize the world has passed him by," while those who concur will sigh, "Too bad he had to wait until the end of his career to tell it like it is."

Both reactions probably carry a grain of truth, but I make it a point to listen to these guys for another reason: I think that anyone who's spent a lifetime of leadership in the church, dealing with the practical side of problems that most of us debate only at the level of theory, deserves a hearing. Experience alone doesn't automatically make these figures right, but it's at least worth pondering what they have to say.

That's the spirit in which I approach the new book *We're All in the Same Boat*, the result of a series of dialogues between retired Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of Milan, now 82, and Fr. Luigi Maria Verzé, founder of the San Raffaele University and Hospital in Milan, who's 89. The book appeared this week in Italy. The publisher is currently working on translations into other languages, although at the moment there's no firm deal for an English version.

The most newsworthy section of the book comes in replies from Martini to questions by Verzé on several hot-button church issues.

For decades, Martini has been the voice of the church's "loyal opposition," meaning center-left Catholics determined to remain within the church but nonetheless disenchanted with some aspects of its direction. In the new book, Martini does not disappoint this constituency, calling for reforms on the admission of divorced and remarried Catholics to the sacraments; making priestly celibacy optional; and a greater role for the local church in the selection of bishops.

The following is an *NCR* translation of the relevant passages, based on extracts which appeared Tuesday in *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's leading daily.

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By CARDINAL CARLO MARIA MARTINI

"You ask me what I think about denying the sacraments to devout Catholics who are divorced. I was very happy about the goodness with which the Holy Father recently lifted the excommunications of the four Lefebvrite bishops. Along with many others, however, I think there are lots of other people who feel marginalized in the church, and we have to think about them too. I'm referring, in particular, to those who are divorced and remarried."

"I'm not talking about all such Catholics, because we must not favor flimsiness and superficiality, but rather promote fidelity and perseverance. Nevertheless, there are some such Catholics who are today in an irreversible, and innocent, state. In fact, they've take on new obligations to children from a second marriage, and there's

absolutely no reason for going back; indeed, such a choice would not be wise. I believe that the church must find solutions for these people."

"I've repeatedly said to priests that they're formed in order to build the new human person according to the gospel. But in reality, they also have to be concerned with healing broken bones and saving those who are shipwrecked. I'm glad that in some cases the church shows benevolence and mildness, but I believe we should do so for all those persons who merit it."

"These are problems that a simple priest, and not even a bishop, can resolve on his own. It's important that the whole church reflect on these cases, and, guided by the pope, find a solution."

"Next, you touch a very important problem, saying that priests ought to be excused from the obligation of celibacy. It's a very delicate question. I believe that celibacy has a great value, which will always remain in the church: it's a great evangelical sign. It's not necessary, however, for that reason to impose it on everyone. In the Eastern Catholic churches, it's not asked of all priests."

"I see that some bishops are proposing to impart priestly ministry to married men who have a certain experience and maturity (the *viri probati*.) It wouldn't be a good idea, however, for these men to be responsible for a parish, in order to avoid even greater levels of clericalism. It seems to me a much better idea to connect these men to a parish in the form of a group that takes turns."

"In any case, this is a serious problem. I believe that when the church deals with it, there will be truly difficult years ahead. Some who are already ordained, for example, will say that the only reason they took vows of celibacy was in order to become priests. On the other hand, I'm certain that there will always be those who choose the path of celibacy, because young people are idealists and generous."

"Moreover, there are some particularly difficult situations in the world, especially in certain continents. I think it's up to the bishops in those countries to acknowledge the situation and to find solutions."

"Finally, you ask me if it wouldn't be more advantageous if the consecration of a bishop happened with the acclamation of the people of God. The selection of bishops has always been a difficult problem in the church. In antique situations in which the people had a greater role, there were arguments and many divisions. Today, perhaps, things have moved too far in the opposite direction. I remember a cardinal who's also a canon lawyer once saying during a meeting that it's not right for the Holy See to carry out two procedures for the same person; one should be done locally, and the second by the nuncio."

"In terms of participation by the people, there are some dioceses in Switzerland and Germany where this happens, but it's hard to say that this always means a better result. In conclusion, this is a very complicated situation. However, the current mode of selection of bishops does need to be improved."

"These are subjects that need much more reflection and conversation. They sometimes surface in the synods of bishops, but there's no follow-up. The problems, however, are real, and we need a public discussion about them."

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When the papal plane took off from Tel Aviv for Rome last Friday at the end of Pope Benedict XVI's swing through the Middle East, most of us in the press corps were fairly punch-drunk. We'd averaged maybe two hours of sleep a night for eight days, and by this stage we were ready to eat, drink and be merry.

The celebratory humor was briefly disrupted by a rumor circulating on some Catholic blogs that the Vatican might step in at the eleventh hour to scuttle U.S. President Barack Oabama's commencement address at the

University of Notre Dame. We began to strategize for requesting a statement from the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi. As we began to peel back the onion, however, it became clear that the rumor was based entirely on bloggers citing other bloggers, who were in turn citing completely unsourced conjecture. Cooler heads prevailed, we didn't bother Lombardi, and there was no dramatic last-minute Vatican intervention.

In the wake of the Obama speech on Sunday, I've received a number of calls from press agencies around the world wanting to know what the "Vatican reaction" was. Unfortunately, there is no such reaction, at least officially: The Vatican said nothing before the fact, and it's said nothing afterwards. That silence itself is noteworthy, but what precisely it means is open to interpretation.

This week, however, the two most widely read news sources in and around the Vatican have commented on the Obama appearance: *L'Osservatore Romano*, the semi-official Vatican daily, and *L'Avvenire*, the newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference. Neither, it should be said, can be read as precise mirror of official Vatican thinking. Among other things, the new editorial team at *L'Osservatore* under Gian Maria Vian has made the once *Pravda*-esque daily a far more interesting product journalistically, but a less reliable guide to the thoughts of officialdom.

Nonetheless, both papers broadly reflect what a substantial number of people in the corridors of power think and feel.

L'Osservatore carried a brief news story about the Obama speech at the top of page three on Monday.

"The search for common ground: that seems to be the path chosen by the President of the United States, Barack Obama, in dealing with the delicate question of abortion," the *L'Osservatore* piece began. "Setting aside the inflammatory tone of the electoral campaign, Obama yesterday confirmed what he had said during a press conference after his first 100 days in the White House when he affirmed that launching a new law on abortion is not a priority of his administration."

The article makes indirect reference to the controversy surrounding Obama's appearance at Notre Dame, but never cites any of the American bishops who criticized the university. It quotes favorably from Obama's address.

Not surprisingly, ardently pro-life American Catholics were appalled. One called the *L'Osservatore* article "a superficial and unsatisfying report."

Perhaps even more irritating from the point of view of pro-lifers in the States, Vian gave a midweek interview to an Italian journalist in which he asserted that Obama "is not a pro-abortion president." Such comments sparked criticism from leading American Catholic conservatives. George Weigel has lamented the "sorry ignorance of recent American history" at *L'Osservatore*, while Deal Hudson has said the time has come for a new editor.

L'Avvenire, on the other hand, carried a harder-hitting front-page editorial on Tuesday signed by Francesco D'Agostino, chair of Italy's National Bioethics Committee, a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life and a consulter to the Pontifical Council for the Family.

D'Agostino challenged Obama's claim that abortion is always a "heart-wrenching" decision for a woman, arguing that in some cases abortion is simply viewed as a means of birth control, and one that doesn't pose a particular ethical dilemma. In that sense, he accused Obama of being either naïve or deliberately disingenuous.

D'Agostino also insisted that anti-abortion forces have been misrepresented.

"Contrary to how they're usually presented, opponents of abortion are not people who want to send women who have abortions to jail at all costs, or who want to see the doctors who help them at trial. They're rather people

who are convinced that it's essential, not only for moral reasons but also for social reasons, that human life -- including prenatal life -- be recognized for its intrinsic value, and, as a result, be respected and protected," he wrote.

In that regard, D'Agostino argued that if Obama's desire to reduce the actual number of abortions is to be meaningful, and not just verbal, he must acknowledge that the legalization of abortion has "strongly attenuated" the respect for prenatal human life in advanced nations.

Although this was a more critical perspective than the *L'Osservatore* piece, there's one interesting wrinkle. Towards the end, D'Agostino argues that abortion is an anthropological problem before it's a legal one, because it raises the fundamental question of whether abortion truly involves the killing of a human life. He makes the following parenthetical remark: "One can agree or disagree with the decriminalization of voluntary abortion," appearing to suggest that either view could be defended, as long as there's clarity on the anthropological point.

That's a more flexible position than many pro-life forces in the States could accept, for whom the legal abolition of abortion is the only morally defensible aim. It's another reminder of the gap between Catholic cultures in Europe and America; in Europe, even the most ardent pro-lifers sometimes seem "soft" by American standards.

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I spent the early part of this week in Rome, covering a study week organized by the Pontifical Academy for Sciences **on genetically modified organisms** [1], or GMOs. The event was organized by a German scientist named Ingo Potrykus, the inventor of "golden rice," who's a Catholic and an academy member. Potrykus believes that wider adoption of golden rice, which is genetically modified to produce higher amounts of a precursor to vitamin A, could save 500,000 lives or more in the developing world every year. It's therefore unsurprising that the 41 scientists and activists assembled by Potrykus took a strongly pro-GMO view.

The line-up led critics to deride the study week as a "total fraud," and sparked a small protest on Monday organized by **Catholic anti-GMO activists** [2] across town in Rome.

From the outside, it may seem curious that both pro- and anti-GMO forces are so concerned about what the Vatican thinks. After all, it's difficult to imagine that regulatory bodies, trade negotiators, or farmers around the world are sitting around waiting for a pronouncement from the Holy See before making up their minds. Yet it's an article of faith on both sides that the debate over GMOs isn't exclusively scientific or economic -- it's also moral and political. A statement from the biggest bully pulpit in organized religion, they believe, could have significant real-world consequences.

It's also the case that some of the strongest anti-GMO positions have come from Catholic bishops' conferences in the developing world, and from Catholic religious orders. Both sides therefore see drawing the Vatican into the debate as a natural strategy -- either to ratify the positions taken at lower levels, or to undercut them.

I'm certainly not in a position to judge the merits of GMOs. As a reporter, however, I can offer the following observation: I'm struck by how acerbic this debate often seems, how quick partisans on both sides are to impugn their opponents' motives.

Critics of GMOs love to point to the financial relationships that some pro-GMO scientists have with agribusiness companies such as Monsanto, with the ugly suggestion being that these scientists are basically intellectual whores, selling their credibility to the highest bidder. Proponents of GMOs, meanwhile, talk about anti-GMO groups as if they're populated by characters straight out of Michael Crichton's novel *State of Fear*, cynically fueling an industry of alarmism in reckless disregard of scientific truth. Talking to these folks, it sometimes seems they believe the other side isn't just wrong, but that it's entirely composed of industry shills,

ideologues, or PR con men.

In my limited experience, that doesn't do justice to reality. Most of the pro-GMO people I've met seem genuinely convinced this about feeding the hungry, putting science at the service of the poor; and the anti-GMO people seem equally sincere that this is about protecting the poor against yet another form of exploitation.

If the Vatican keeps its eye on the issue -- not just the Academy for Sciences, but possibly other departments such as the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the Pontifical Council for Culture (which in recent years has focused on the relationship between faith and science), the Secretariat of State, and the Synod of Bishops -- perhaps there's a contribution the Vatican can make that few other global actors could pull off: Fostering a discussion focused on the ethical and public policy merits of GMOs, rather than well-poisoning and character assassination.

By itself, that could be a powerful step in the right direction.

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