

3-7-08 - Imagining the perfect papal visit: If he pays attention, Benedict will find great diversity in the American church

By RICHARD R. GAILLARDETZ, National Catholic Reporter

Pope Benedict XVI's upcoming U.S. visit -- his first since taking office -- is sure to turn up the volume on media white noise related to tensions between the Vatican and the U.S. Catholic church. Before and during the April 15-20 events, the media will report on statistics demonstrating disagreement between the Vatican and American Catholics on reproductive issues, end-of-life questions, women's ordination and homosexuality. The clerical sexual abuse scandal will be recalled and its fallout revisited. Voices will complain of Vatican meddling and peremptory condemnations of American theologians, of the alleged secularization of Catholic institutions, of recent norms relaxing restrictions on the Tridentine Mass. Experts of all stripes will scrutinize the pope's homilies and speeches for hidden meanings.

These issues and concerns are valid. But I prefer to imagine a different kind of papal visit, a visit that would depart from the pattern of past papal trips established by Pope John Paul II, a visit that would cut through the white noise and get to matters of ecclesial substance.

When Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected pope almost three years ago, many cardinals credited his remarkable listening skills as a factor in his election. Since that conclave we have seen tentative signs of a "listening pope," one who encouraged freedom of debate at the episcopal synod on the Eucharist and who dared to entertain his former colleague, Hans Küng, for dinner. I would like to imagine what would happen if Pope Benedict were to come to our shores as a "listening pope." What if he were to see this visit as a kind of papal fact-finding mission?

Such a fact-finding mission might bring him to a more concrete consciousness of an important reality: The American religious scene is not the same as that in Western Europe. Our American church is not without its faults and pastoral challenges, but these faults and challenges are quite distinct from those of the European church. America does not suffer from the forces of secularization. For all of our failings, ours is still a remarkably religious culture. One of the great gifts of the American experiment is its distinctive legal framework for the separation of church and state. This framework has allowed religion to thrive in our country to an extent unmatched in Western Europe. At the same time, one of the peculiar religious consequences of the American experiment lies in the impact of free market forces on American religion. This free market context has led to the individualism of the American spiritual seeker and helped foster a consumerist approach toward religious experiences, beliefs and practices. An awareness of the distinctive shape of our religious scene would only enhance the pope's pastoral outreach to the American church.

I can imagine a papal fact-finding mission in which the pope would meet not only with VIPs and bishops but with pastors, liturgical and catechetical leaders and other lay ecclesial ministers in order to get a better grasp of the pastoral realities of the American church. To be sure, not everything he would hear would be positive. Catechists and youth ministers would likely express their concern regarding young Catholics' more tenuous commitment to the institutional church and their inadequate grasp of the basics of the Catholic faith.

Yet he would also learn of an American church filled with parishes that are thriving because a generation of pastors took seriously the implementation of the vision of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). He would discover an educated laity that wants to be heard, because they have felt empowered by the Spirit and believe that their experience and insight has something to offer church leadership. He might well be impressed by accounts of hundreds of parishes that have implemented Vatican II's sacramental and liturgical renewal, particularly in the area of Christian initiation. Liturgical ministers might find the courage to tell him that the most serious threats to our liturgical life are not found in pottery chalices and priests shaking too many hands at the sign of peace. They would suggest instead our church's need for a deeper liturgical spirituality. They would almost certainly warn him of the danger of a weakened eucharistic spirituality as more and more Catholics are deprived of the regular celebration of the Eucharist by a shortage of priests.

The pope is, in fact, supposed to meet with presidents of Catholic universities. When he does, I hope he will set aside any expectations created by the complaints he has likely received about Catholic universities in America. If he really listens to these presidents, he will find that many share his concerns about preserving and even enhancing Catholic identity on their campuses; it is just that they do not all agree that the issue can be solved by imposing the catechism as the primary theology text or by banning on-campus performances of “The Vagina Monologues.” After they discuss issues of Catholic identity, I hope those presidents will also tell him about the remarkable number of students who do service work while completing their studies and then, upon graduating, go on to participate in the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps or the Jesuit Volunteer Corps.

As for the American Catholic theological scene, a topic of intense Vatican concern, I would like to imagine a papal meeting with a representative group of American Catholic theologians. At such a meeting he might receive a report from leaders of the Catholic Theological Society of America, an organization that some critics have characterized as a hotbed of dissent. In that report he would learn that their last national convention was dedicated to the theme “The Bishop in the Church.” He would hear that every bishop in the United States and Canada was invited to attend and that a number of bishops from throughout the world spoke at the conference. If he were to ask those present about the controversial views of certain “questionable” American theologians, he might learn that the American theological community is more ideologically diverse than he imagines and that it has often anticipated Vatican objections with its own critical inquiry. He would hear of vigorous debates in which provocative new works were critically assessed by theological peers.

These theologians might respectfully remind him, however, that the theologian must also be willing to explore fresh readings of the tradition and respond to new questions raised by the world today. This task is inherently experimental and provisional. Consequently, they might point out, many American theologians would prefer that accusations of heresy and dissent be made only with the greatest of care.

I also like to think that the pope would be fascinated by the theme for the upcoming 2008 convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America -- “Generations.” This theme was chosen because the most compelling division in American Catholic theology today is not orthodoxy versus dissent. The most compelling tension is largely generational in character and centers on differences between older Catholic theologians whose work has been explicitly shaped by the agenda of Vatican II and a younger generation of theologians who, without repudiating Vatican II, are more concerned with the need for the church to fashion a more constructive response to the demise of a coherent Catholic subculture.

Finally, if the pope were to spend time with some American Catholic theologians it might become more evident to him that even so-called “progressive” theologians remain profoundly Catholic and teach and write out of a tremendous love and appreciation for the breadth and depth of our tradition.

I have but scratched the surface of the many helpful things the pope might learn about our church. As that minister charged with preserving the unity of faith and communion of the universal church, the pope certainly has obligations that go beyond listening. He might properly remind us, over the course of his visit, that there is more to the universal church’s mission than our own ecclesial agendas. He could help us appreciate that we are but part of a much more global ecclesial reality, one manifested not only in New York and San Antonio, Munich and Rome but also in Mexico City and Manila in the Philippines, Bogotá, Colombia, and Kinshasa, Zaire. Even so, we, the American church, are part of that larger ecclesial reality, and the testimony to our distinctive ecclesial richness deserves to be heard.

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