

4-13-08 - A Puzzling, Pleasing Nation: The Pope Will See an Often Impertinent but Promising Flock  
By Michelle Boorstein, Washington Post Staff Writer

To Pope Benedict, experts say, the U.S. Catholic Church is a bit like an adolescent: young and unpredictable.

There are bankrupt dioceses and empty seminaries -- yet tens of thousands of laypeople are stepping into the chasm to lead their churches.

One of every 10 American Catholics has left the faith -- yet close to half of U.S. Catholics attend Mass at least monthly.

Tens of thousands of traditional Catholics have clamored for tickets to the pope's Thursday Mass at Nationals Park, yet many more think he's too rigid -- or irrelevant.

But how does Benedict understand this picture?

"At the Vatican, there is an admiration for American religiosity," said Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete, a theologian. "But there is a question whether American religiosity is strong enough. It appears to be, from the Vatican point of view, content-free, more spiritual high and emotion than a serious question as to what is true and what is not."

American Catholics can't agree whether they're in crisis or renewal. All sides describe a community in dramatic demographic flux. Further, it is divided in key ways, including the importance of male clergy, immigration and the authority of not only Catholicism but also Christianity.

Yet to Benedict, a German scholar, America looks religiously vibrant compared with secular Europe, with U.S. politicians touting their religiosity and U.S. courts reaffirming faith's role in public life.

The fact of his visit shows the importance of the American church to the Vatican. At 80, Benedict travels infrequently; this is only his eighth foreign trip in three years as pope. And American Catholics make up just 6 percent of the world church, a percentage that's shrinking as the number of Catholics in Africa and Asia boom.

But culturally and financially, Americans loom super-sized. For those reasons and others, Benedict experts say he views the United States as an essential battleground in what he considers the war of today's era: proving that modernity doesn't have to stamp out religious faith.

It's well-known that U.S. Catholics disagree with the Vatican on issues of sexuality, including abortion and same-sex marriage. According to recent Washington Post-ABC News surveys, 63 percent of Catholics, compared with 55 percent of all adults, believe gay couples should have access to the same legal protections as heterosexual couples. And 62 percent of Catholics, compared with 57 percent of all adults, say abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Large swaths of Catholics also part ways with Benedict's teachings on immigration, the Iraq war and capital punishment.

Jose Casanova, a Georgetown University professor who specializes in religion and globalization, says there is a growing segment of American Catholics who are essentially developing their own, individualized religion, in tension with the hierarchy but vibrant and spiritual. He calls it "faithful dissent."

In a recent interview, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the Vatican's ambassador to the United States, was asked about American values. Young people around the world sing, dance, eat and cultivate American-ness, Sambi told the National Catholic Reporter. But, he said, "If you look carefully at all this, you see that what America is exporting throughout the world, especially to the youth of this world, is not always the most noble and constructive qualities America has to offer."

American Catholicism is being quickly Hispanicized, which is most obviously reflected in more charismatic worship in the pews and more interest in immigration and social welfare at the polls. More than a third of American Catholic adults, and half of Catholics under 40, are Latino. The infusion of Latino Catholicism is generally seen as a huge shot in the arm to the U.S. church.

At Nationals Park, Benedict will see Catholics representing growing immigrant populations of Salvadorans, Africans and Vietnamese. He'll hear four choirs sing Gregorian chants, gospel and jazz in 10 languages .

He'll be applauded by people such as Ray Flynn, former Boston mayor and ambassador to the Vatican, who loves the idea of papal hierarchy because it means "people aren't out there freelancing, talking about their opinion of what the faith teaches. It makes us more unified."

And people such as Alex Alvarado, a 34-year-old Silver Spring waiter who is originally from El Salvador. Alvarado calls himself evangelical, and his regular congregation meets in different living rooms. When he came to this country in the 1980s, he says, "'Catholic' meant something much more limited" -- more white.

But Benedict won't see people such as John Cecotti, a 68-year-old Bethesda management consultant who goes to Mass weekly. He respects the pope the way he does the Dalai Lama, and he thinks that the Vatican is "a good old boys' club that needs a wake-up call" and that the church needs female and married priests.

Or Carrie Drummond, a 34-year-old animal adoption specialist from Alexandria who rarely goes to church and "isn't a big fan of the pope or church doctrine" but believes she understands and lives the essence of Catholicism: take care of other people. "This pope's idea that the Catholic faith is the one, or that other world religions don't have credibility?" she says. "Come on, we don't need to be limiting dialogue; we should be expanding it."

Some critics believe dialogue in the church has been severely limited by alleged cover-ups of the clergy sex abuse scandal, which has seriously scarred U.S. Catholicism, left thousands of victims emotionally wounded, bankrupted six dioceses and resulted in more than \$2 billion in payouts to victims. Many Catholics -- and ex-Catholics -- cite failed church leadership in the scandal as a source of lost faith.

Top Vatican officials say Benedict will address the crisis, and possibly meet victims, while he's in the United States, but many advocates are angry he hasn't been more direct and left the center of the crisis -- Boston -- off his itinerary.

A major, ongoing challenge for the American church is how to reconcile the monarchical structure of Catholicism with democracy. As headlines from Nigeria and England scream about religious freedom and freedom of conscience, young Americans find it harder to accept certain aspects of the Catholic Church, some critics say.

"You can't be an infant religiously while the world is inviting you to take adult responsibility in every other facet of your life," said James Carroll, a former priest who has written extensively about American Catholicism and anti-Semitism in the church. "Most American Catholics are beyond the point of angry protests."

While they are often at odds with the Vatican, U.S. Catholics are so in line with their own country that political scientists often say there is no "Catholic vote" -- that Catholics live and vote very much like the population in general.

Some Vatican observers say the view of American Catholics from Rome has improved in recent decades. Among them is Vatican journalist John Allen, who says church officials decades ago viewed America as "sort of a cowboy culture with a certain recklessness" and with an independent-minded Catholic Church.

At a recent forum at the Pew Research Center, he said the Vatican now has a "real fondness and appreciation for what they see as the religious health of American culture in comparison with contemporary Europe."

The U.S. church is changing. Latinos will lead it in new directions, including geographically. That's because almost three in four Latino Catholics live in the South and the West, shifting the center of the U.S. church from the Northeast.

Because of the plummeting number of U.S.-born priests, clergy are increasingly being sent here from places of new growth, such as India. About 35,000 lay ministers, 80 percent of whom are women, keep many parishes running.

"You don't have to be a math genius to see that somewhere along the line, it doesn't matter how many you import, this clerical church will look quite different," said Paul Lakeland, an expert on U.S. Catholic laity.

But some believe the American church is about to right itself. Two orthodox popes in a row have built a clear sense in a relativistic culture of what is "Catholic," the thinking goes. Also, the Latino influx "suggests springtime for the American church," author Michael Sean Winters said. "The Latin American church still generates culture, unlike the American church. It generates art, myth, the things that help people sustain relationships."

Many Benedict-watchers say he believes the ultimate challenge goes beyond the sex abuse scandal, sociology or politics.

"Christianity is stronger here than anywhere else in the West, but we are at the frontier of the encounter between faith and modernity," Albacete said. "If Catholics can learn how to live here in a way that is reasonable and human and compassionate, it will be a great example for the church. Will we be up to it, I don't know."