

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

GLOBAL SOUTH

I did it again. I went to another John Allen talk, the CNN Vatican correspondent, regular contributor to the National Catholic Reporter, author, and lecturer. About two years ago, I attended my first Allen presentation and wrote a column about Catholic identity, one of his 10 trends he sees in the Church today. My question was: why is Catholic identity so important? That remains unanswered.

Why did I recently go to another Allen presentation, even though he had a similar message? Probably because I thought there was another column in there somewhere. And so there is!

Folded into his remarks then and now was a description of the global South and its impact on Vatican policy.

He maintains that the religious agenda is very different in a USA/Western European setting than it is in the global South – South America, Africa, parts of Asia. In the global North, the questions are usually framed in “liberal vs. conservative” issues (birth control, liturgical norms, Church authority, optional clerical celibacy, ordination of women, homosexuality, etc.) whereas in the global South the issues are more related to justice, poverty, and Catholicism as being recognizably different from common cultural values and other religions.

Allen provides a helpful analysis of worldwide Catholicism. But the issues of the global South and their millions of very young Catholics do not determine the issues of the USA. Like Jesus lived and St. Paul taught, Christianity is Incarnational, embedded in the culture and society of multiple arenas. If I understand Allen’s comments correctly, some powerful Church leaders shape policy and promote teachings that try to neutralize this diversity in favor of an identifiable, world-wide uniformity. They want clear, universal answers to Catholic questions.

Progressive Catholics in the USA and Western Europe seem marginalized in this global strategy. We are simply out-numbered, and our issues are considered trivial, unworthy of attention. We are written off as bitter, whining, generally aging, frustrated malcontents unable to adjust to a new agenda. We do not have a place at the table (although this is what Allen calls for) if the issues are celibacy, women’s ordination, homosexuality, birth control, appointment of

bishops, liturgical norms, etc. Our positions on these issues are not considered, and we are condemned for holding them. We are dismissed in favor of the issues facing the global South.

Hold on, just a minute! Why is this an either-or? Why are the issues of the youthful global South pitted against the issues of the aging North? Makes no sense. Aging Vatican II progressives have been champions of social justice for 40 years. The universal Church could choose to deal with all these issues; there is no need to side with the issues of one part of the world as opposed to another part of the world. No need at all.

It seems to me that Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and most of the Bishops they have selected over the last 30 years have deliberately chosen to starve the global North issues. I don't say this in anger; it just appears to be objective reality. They obviously starved infant, core Vatican II themes like collegiality, subsidiarity, and gender equality while they clearly nourished a Vatican I Church with its sexism, clericalism, and devotionism that spawned and coddled Evangelical Catholicism.

I don't want a fight with John Allen because I respect him so much – and because I would lose! But the picture I got from his presentation both times is that the Vatican is a passive observer of the ten trends he identifies. The Vatican looks around the world, sees what is happening, and responds to what it sees.

My view is that the Vatican is an active player in shaping many of those trends, particularly the ones that are internal to the Church. The Vatican wields enormous power in determining which “trends” grow and which ones wither. The Vatican has an agenda and they implement it subtly and not so subtly.

Allan rightly maintains that there are “tribes” in the Church and in society, and the tribes don't dialogue with each other. So true. But to dialogue fruitfully and as friends, we must start with calling a miter, a miter.