

## Interview with Cardinal Francis George

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*NCR* senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. interviewed Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, who marks his tenth anniversary this year at the helm of the one of the largest and wealthiest dioceses in the world. If things hold to form, George will also take over as the new president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at their fall meeting in Baltimore Nov. 12-15, becoming, in effect, the public face of the church just as America plunges into an election cycle. That combination makes George an important figure indeed in the Catholic firmament.

*NCR:* In March, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, gave an address to the Ethics and Finance Association in the city of Milan. Asked to express the "main objective" of Benedict's pontificate, he offered this formula: "To recover authentic Christian identity and to explain and confirm the intelligibility of the faith in the context of widespread secularism." Would you agree?

**Cardinal George:** I think that's the Holy Father's purpose, his personal concern. He's made that clear, both before he was elected pope and since. The pope does many things, but in terms of his personal concerns that's certainly true.

*What does "recovering Christian identity" mean?*

I think for the pope, and in fact, what it means is an understanding of what it is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in his body, the church, in the circumstances in which we live which make that discipleship sometimes very difficult. That has always been the case — each generation throws up its own difficulties.

*So why all the concern with Catholic identity today?*

I think there are two sides to that. One is what John Paul II often said, that there are whole cultures that used to be shaped by the faith but that aren't shaped by the faith any longer. That's why he talked about the evangelization of culture. The culture the present Holy Father is most concerned about is that of Western Europe and its cultural colonies, like our own country. In that particular culture, individualism is so embedded that the loss of a collective identity is rampant. Each one feels not only free but obliged to determine his or her own religious identity, so we have a plethora of understandings of what it means to be Catholic as well as what it means to be human and what it means to be anything else. It's hard to bring that all together, because the culture doesn't foster any kind of collective identity, it fosters individualism.

*Is that perhaps why one of the leading edges these days of identity concerns is in ecclesiology, or doctrines about the church?*

Sure, if your sense of discipleship is so individualistic that it doesn't have any collective reality, then where does the church come into that except as your personal spiritual support group or spiritual club? But I also think the pope [accents ecclesiology] because that is the principal subject for theologians coming out of the Second Vatican Council, and he was a theologian at the council. The advances in Catholic theology, the development of doctrine, were most clearly around ecclesiology than around any other subject. It's taken a long time even to establish

ecclesiology as a separate theological discipline within the scope of theological discourse. It's a contemporary concern, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*It was Guardini who said the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be the century of the church.*

Yes. Ecclesiology didn't develop at all in the beginning. In the history of doctrinal development, it was the nature of Jesus, then the Trinity, then the sacraments at the time of the Reformation. Each general council spoke to those things. The first time that ecclesiology became itself a subject of concern, rather than the context in which all the other concerns were addressed, was a legal concern for establishing the church vis-à-vis the secular political order at the end of the High Middle Ages. The first ecclesiological treatises were canonical. It was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that German theologians began to use the Biblical metaphors for the church ... mystical body of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit. They began to write books on the church, coming from those titles. In the papal magisterium, it came full-blown with Pius XII and *Mystici Corpus Christi*. They had all that as preparatory for the work of the Second Vatican Council, which complete the ecclesiological work of the First Vatican Council. In the last century, certainly, and probably in the beginning of this one, it's the field of theology that probably advanced the most quickly and defined itself the most quickly, along with moral theology.

*Cardinal Avery Dulles once wrote that "the greatest danger facing the Church in our country today is that of an excessive and indiscreet accommodation." In similar fashion, in a forthcoming book another American bishop warns of an "erosion of Catholic identity" and what he calls the "wholesale assimilation — absorption might be a better word — of Catholics by American culture." Do you agree with that assessment?*

I think it depends on which generation you're talking about, and which ethnic group. The third, fourth, fifth, sixth generation of Irish, German, and Italian Catholics are far more prone to that because they're here. This is their only home, and they've done very well in many ways. They've established the church very well. The boundaries that would protect people from some of the cultural proclivities that aren't helpful to the faith — and some are helpful — aren't there anymore. They used to be kept up artificially by institutions, but the institutions are porous now in ways they haven't ever been.

*What do you mean?*

Those immigrant groups came and looked around at a country shaped by the Protestant faith, not the Catholic faith, where the Catholic faith was suspect very often — not just suspect, but even persecuted in many ways. To defend themselves, they not only had their families, but their parishes, their schools, their hospitals, their universities, and their papers. They never had separate Catholic labor unions like you had in parts of Europe, because the laboring class was so strongly Catholic that they just simply took over the unions.

*They became de facto Catholic unions.*

Yes, many of them. Other than that, we created alternatives to the mainstream institutions. They were never, I think, ghetto institutions, because they prepared people to take their place in mainstream society. They didn't try to cut them off from it, but to prepare people to take their place in the mainstream precisely as Catholics. Once they succeeded, then the value of those very institutions seemed to be lessened, and the institutions themselves said it's important for us

to be mainstream, and to no longer be so identifiably Catholic. So they're porous in ways that they weren't before.

*Would you say excessively so?*

It depends. You have to take it one by one. Some are, some aren't. The generations coming now, the second generation of the Vietnamese, the second and third generation of Hispanics, are not assimilated in the same way. This is sometimes for linguistic reasons, or because the family is still far more able to protect them from some of the influences towards individualism that the older generations of Catholics who are here longer don't find necessary, or don't have any longer. So it all depends. To talk about Catholics in general is difficult. You have to ask which groups, how long have they been here, what are they doing. I suppose what the bishop you mention is talking about is more those third, fourth, fifth, sixth generation Irish, Germans, Italians, some Poles, whose only culture is that of this country. The Catholic subculture that was developed by those institutions isn't very strong in their lives. We've reduced the tension between faith and culture, and there's always tension. There has to be.

*Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge talk about the distinction between "high tension" and "low tension" religion, arguing that over time low tension groups tend to dissolve into secularism.*

That's right. In the 60s, it was very important to show you could be American and Catholic. Whole magazines were devoted to that. There was a collective sigh of relief at the Second Vatican Council, with human freedom being so much in the forefront of the conciliar concerns, that the tension wasn't there anymore. I think some of the moves of the church in that period now seem sociologically naïve, in their long-term consequences.

*What do you have in mind?*

Catholicism as a distinctive way of life was defined by eating habits and fasting, and by days especially set aside that weren't part of the general secular calendar. They were reminders that the church is our mediator in our relationship to God, and can enter into the *horarium* [calendar] that we keep, into the foods that we eat, into all the aspects of daily life, into sexual life. Once you say that all those things can be done individually, as you choose to do penance, for example, you reduce the collective presence of the church in somebody's consciousness. At that point, the church as mediator becomes more an idea for many people. Even if they accept it, it's not a practice. So then when the church turns around and says 'You have to do this,' then resistance is there to say, 'How can you tell me that? I'm deciding on my life for myself, and you even told me I could!'

*So what's the answer? Is it rebuilding a subculture?*

I suppose it is, though not in a way that's divorced from the culture that we have now, which is ours — what else are we? It doesn't have to be so intentional and deliberate, except in the case of religious congregations, of course. For ordinary lay people, they are to consecrate the world within the world, as their world, not to be separate from it. If there is a subculture, it would have to be developed naturally in relationship to today's crisis, as those earlier institutions were at one point. You can't go back, I think, and imagine that we're back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, just taking those solutions, good though they were then, to be ours now. What it would look like, I don't know.

*Can you point to something that offers an example of a viable contemporary Catholic subculture not excessively cut off from the broader society?*

Do I see evidence of life in the church? Yes, and I think it's primarily in the parishes. In Protestant ecclesiology, the church is what we would call a parish — this is my church. The church in Catholic ecclesiology is a diocese which has parishes, and then the universal church. Parishes are very strong in this kind of culture, and without being Protestants, we organize ourselves more or less along those lines. A lot of effort goes into the parishes, and some of the parishes are extremely good. They create a world, a subculture, as people get involved in their parish, which is sufficient very often for people to pursue in the world. Maybe there are other things too, but the parish is very important.

*So in the main, our parishes are not excessively porous, to use your language?*

Again it depends, you have to take it one by one. But I think we have a lot of very good parishes, very vibrant parishes, which do form people in the Catholic faith so they can live it in the world.

*I ask because some people believe that many parishes have become so porous that there's almost a need to construct parallel institutions.*

That's always been the case, hasn't it? You have religious life, for one thing, which is a constant tug to say this world isn't enough, that there's a radical Catholicism that says I give up everything — as Jesus said we all must in the end, but we do it now, as if we're already dead. Vows are a way of saying I'm dead to the world. Beyond that, there are also the movements. There have always been movements, very fine movements, such as the Jocist movements before the council, that revitalize the parishes and the parishes gave them stability. They formed people in their catechesis and gave them to the movements, and the movements made them missionary in their outlook, more evangelical, and they went back and revitalized the parishes. The post-conciliar church has those lay movements that are very strong in some places. Where the parishes are weak, the movements take on more importance. Somebody told me that one out of every four people practicing their faith in Europe belongs to one of these movements. That tells me that perhaps the parishes are weak in Europe, so the movements have to pick up the intentionality of Catholicism that is taken up in this country, where the parishes are stronger, by the parishes themselves. The movements haven't for that reason become strong here as elsewhere.

*Are you saying that in this country, the primary forum in which efforts to restore what Robert Louis Wilken has called "thickness" and "density" to Catholic life, meaning a stronger sense of Catholic distinctiveness, should be the parish?*

You asked me where I see it, and I see it in the parish. I'm not sure it's primary, but that's an obvious place to start. The parish is an American institution as well as a Catholic institution. People understand a congregation. We don't use quite the same terminology, but people understand it sociologically, so it doesn't create the tension. Yet it does draw people into a Catholic ethos that does convert them at its best. Sometimes it doesn't, sometimes our parishes are social clubs, spiritual clubs, like any other, in which case they're too porous, giving you grounds for spirituality but not for conversion to the faith. That can happen. But a lot of parishes are still quite healthy, I think, and good Catholic places. That doesn't mean they're the only place it happens. There are the movements, there are new communities that start up in different

ways. There's a world of music, very often, which I'm not really into. My music is classical or old hymns, something like that. But you listen to young people, and a lot of times music creates a world. Some of the music they're into is very Catholic, it's very good, even some of the stuff that isn't explicitly Catholic but it carries Catholic values. So you'd have to step back and ask where are the seeds of life, because there are *semina Verbi*, in the conciliar terms, in this culture the same as any other culture. But that doesn't take away from the central thesis, which is that we're in some trouble in terms of Catholic identity. Catholic identity, basically, is there if someone holds the Catholic faith in its integrity, understands it well enough according to age and disposition. It's somebody who holds the faith in a sufficiently catechized way and can say, 'I accept all of it.' At the same time, he or she does that in Catholic communion, someone who has a pastor and who knows what a bishop is and who understands the relationship to the universal church, because that's the network of visible communion established by the Lord when he asked the apostles to take up the mission. So the relationship part of it, to Christ through the apostolic church, along with the profession of the apostolic faith in the network of communion ... those are the two poles. Depending upon whether you're left or right, as we define those terms in the culture today, you have trouble with one or the other. The right would say, 'I accept all the faith, but I can't stand the bishop,' while on the other hand the left says, 'The faith is goofy, but my bishop's not a bad guy.'

*I'd like to shift to some of the particular arenas in which these identity tensions work themselves out. The first is liturgy. You serve on Vox Clara [the advisory body to the Congregation for Divine Worship on English-language translations]. Where do we stand on the Sacramentary? [The texts for the Mass.] I've interviewed Cardinal Pell about this for over five years, and every time I talk to him he says we're 18 months away. We're maybe 18 months away! They're hoping for 2009.*

*Do you believe it?*

Well, ICEL has done almost all its work. [The International Commission on English in the Liturgy, responsible for translating the Latin originals of liturgical texts into English.] Now it has to go to the conferences and to the congregation. The Congregation for Worship will use Vox Clara to help make the decisions about it. Much of the translation is complete.

*Complete at a high level of quality?*

I think so. I think ICEL does its work very seriously now, but of course the rules of the game have changed. With *Liturgiam Authenticam* [a March 2001 Vatican document requiring a more close translation of the Latin originals], you have different rules. If the rules are different, then the translation will look different. It isn't a banal translation. It tries to make use of the riches of English vocabulary. It also tries to be syntactically closer to the Latin, so that people will know that it is Latinate, it's not original, but it still is good English. There are many styles in English, and that's one of them. It will therefore be a language that is not everyday language, but it is still readily comprehensible to anyone who is an English speaker and who has studied English literature. It's a higher kind of translation, but I think it's very clear, and most of all I think it's more faithful in the sense, not that it's more literal, but that it has picked up a lot of things that simply are not in the present translation. When you have a 'Gloria' translated that simply forgets about seven lines of the original hymn, that's not exactly a faithful translation. There was a lot of that, for good purposes then. Remember, that was a different time ... we were going to adapt, we

were foreign for too long and we're going to change. The trouble is, as somebody said, if you marry the *Zeitgeist*, you're a widow very quickly. ICEL itself was extremely critical of its own first translation. It isn't as if you had ICEL fighting for what we've got now. They created a new translation for the second edition of the Roman Missal that is very different, and I think very good in many ways. It has influenced the third edition, which is being translated now.

*Bishop Donald Trautman and others worry that when that Sunday comes and you have to explain to people that from now on they will be saying "and with your Spirit" rather than "and also with you," there will be a negative reaction. Do you share those concerns?*

Hopefully, there will be a lot of good catechesis, which is already being prepared in all the English-speaking countries. That [a negative reaction] will happen if it's not well prepared. It will be a lot harder, as we all know, to go from English to English than from Latin to English. The Latin was foreign anyway, and this was our language. Now we've got something that is our language, and we've got something new that is also our language with a slightly different cast. That's going to be hard. Beyond that, we've memorized. I can say the canons by heart. We can enter into them and pray them. Even if they're not great translations, they're not bad, and in many ways they're quite beautiful. I've made them my own. It's good when you say "We believe," and people go down the line through the Creed. We're changing four lines in that thing. It's going to be difficult. People will go back again to reading it, whereas for 20 years now we've just been able to remember it. That's not going to be easy, and nobody's looking forward to it.

*Is it worth it?*

Oh yes. I think the translations are superior. There's a lot of the richness of the Roman rite, and therefore our faith, because our liturgy reflects our faith, that we will have present in our hearts again. But it will take 20 years, maybe, before we have it memorized. I mean, I'll probably go to my death fighting not to say, "and also with you," because it's so second nature by now. People know immediately what to do. That's great, that's a sign of unity. So we're introducing a discordant note in our unity, for a good purpose. I think the reason is very adequate, but it's going to be work.

*Speaking of discordant notes in our unity, the Holy Father's recent motu proprio broadening permission for celebration of the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass has generated some controversy. In Chicago, do you anticipate widespread use of the old Mass?*

Since you have over half the presbyterate who really can't handle Latin, I don't see huge numbers. Among the others who could handle it, they made a decision after the council that they're not going to use Latin again. For them, it's a matter of principle that they wouldn't use it. Therefore, 'widespread' isn't going to happen, I don't think, at least for the next several years. We have it now, it's built up over the years, where people have asked for it in five different places in five different parts of the city. Every Sunday, maybe 3,000 people worship God using the old missal.

*That was prior to the motu proprio?*

Yes.

*Any increase after the motu proprio?*

I had one priest say that maybe I'd like to start it in my parish, and we're talking about that. It depends on how many people want it, it depends on whether when he goes away we can find somebody who can continue it or not. We're discussing whether this is a good thing to do. He's not too far from other places where it's celebrated, but he says my parishioners want it in my parish. We're talking about that now. Maybe in a couple of places in the diocese where it's not really accessible, such as the southwestern corner and a few other places, we might look at that. But I haven't seen wide demand. Nobody's written me letters saying, 'Ah, now at last we can do this.' So far, there is no such reaction. We are going to be sure that the seminarians, when they do their practicum on the new Mass, also receive some instruction about what the Tridentine rite looks like, so it's not foreign to them. It's the extraordinary expression of the Roman rite, so they should know it. Many of them, I suspect, won't really be prepared to celebrate it. We demand more Latin of them now. They must have at least two years, and that's been the case for some years. But that's perhaps not enough to actually celebrate it, and the bishop has to be sure that the priest-celebrant can actually celebrate.

*Even if they don't do it publically, do you see more of your priests celebrating the old Mass privately?*

I have no indication that they're doing that, or that they would want to do that. There might be a few. I could think of several, but you could count them, I think, on two hands ... maybe one hand.

*Prior to the release of the motu proprio, I wrote an op/ed piece for the New York Times in which I argued that this would be one of those classic Vatican documents which, because of its symbolic importance, generates a lot of debate, but practically changes little on the ground. Does that seem right to you?*

We'll see, but it made sense to me when I read it, and it still makes sense to me now.

Symbolically, it is important, mostly because the pope wants to insist that there was no rupture [between the pre- and post-Vatican II periods], and it shouldn't have been treated as a rupture. The old Mass is there now, extraordinary but nonetheless present, as a kind of template to draw people into perhaps a more reverential celebration of the Eucharist. It's there, and that's helpful. On the other hand, most of the practicing Catholics I know, including those in my own family, who have always been good Mass-goers and who have nothing against the Tridentine rite, remember it and appreciate it, but they say, 'We're somewhere else now.'

*In other words, they wouldn't want to do it every Sunday.*

Yes, yes. It's available, and it's readily available in Chicago, and might be more available, but it's always going to be what the pope called it: 'extraordinary.'

*A related issue with the old Missal is the Good Friday liturgy, and specifically the prayer for the conversion of the Jews. Where do you think we are with that?*

First of all, we have to clarify something, because there are two opinions there and we've asked the Holy See to clear this up. As you know, in the Triduum [Holy Week] you may not have a private Mass. So therefore, the permission to use that Missal privately doesn't apply, because you can't say a private Mass. So the first reaction is, well, that means you can't use that Missal for the Triduum, so that's the end of that. All the public services will be from the new Missal. Others come back and say no, say you have a parish that is only Tridentine. They would also

have the Holy Week ceremonies from that Missal. I'm not sure that's permitted, and that's what we're asking. If that is permitted, then we have to look at it the tenor of the prayers. Not just the tenor, because that was changed under John XXIII. What the Jewish people with whom I've talked object to is that, even though the adjective "perfidious" is gone, it's still a prayer for the conversion of the Jews. In a way, the Triduum now says that too, but in a very, very discrete way. It's very respectful, that God first spoke to the Jews, but to come to the fullness of redemption, and if you understand 'fullness of redemption,' it means come to accept Jesus Christ. But it doesn't say it. It's a contrast to the language in the old Missal.

*Would your preference be to use the language of new Missal for this prayer on Good Friday, even when people are celebrating the Tridentine rite?*

If you're celebrating the 1962 Missal, that would involve changing the text of the prayer.

*That can be done, yes?*

Of course it can be done, and I suspect it probably will be, because the intention is to be sure that our prayers are not offensive to the Jewish people who are our ancestors in the faith. We can't possibly insult them in our liturgy. So that has to be done very, very carefully.

*But you think ultimately the decision will be to use the new prayer in the old rite?*

I'm still not sure whether [the old rite on Good Friday] is permitted at all. I think we have to talk to the Jewish community. Not that any group has a veto on anybody's prayers, because you can go through Jewish texts and find material that is offensive to us. But if we're interested in keeping the dialogue strong, and we have to be, we should be very cautious about any prayer that they find insulting. 'They,' however, is a big tent. What my Jewish rabbi friend down the block finds insulting is different from what Abraham Foxman finds insulting. Also, it does work both ways. Maybe this is an opening to say, 'Would you care to look at some of the Talmudic literature's description of Jesus as a bastard, and so on, and maybe make a few changes in some of that?' This is an opening for discussion. Everybody's theological position has to be respected. Their theological position, and ours with them, is that they are the chosen people of God. If they're not, we're in trouble. We don't mind prayers that say that, and they have them. What we have to also say is that we believe Jesus is the savior of the human race, that he's also saved Jews, and it's always better to know your Savior than not to know him. We can't say that you'd be better off not knowing Jesus Christ. We can't say that in prayer, we can't say that personally, and we can't say that in fact. We're always very clear on that. But you have to say it in a way that doesn't incite any kind of disdain, or cause hurt.

*By the way, if we end up modifying the prayer for the conversion of the Jews in the old Missal, should we do the same thing for the prayers for the heretics and pagans?*

We don't have a 'Heretic Protection Society'! But we should pray to convert ourselves, first of all, because we have a long way to go. In that, we include everybody else, so of course we pray for everybody's conversion.

*I ask because there are some in the Protestant world who take the language about 'heretics' as a reference to them, and so it creates a similar kind of hurt as what you described for the Jews.*

Well, as long as they're not the same people who are telling me the pope is the anti-Christ and I'm going to go to Hell unless I've accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior. It works both ways. I would want to know, who's complaining?

*Another arena in which these identity tensions play themselves out is the question of Catholics in public life. Are we going to see a replay in 2008 of the tensions that surrounded the issue of communion for pro-choice Catholic politicians in 2004?*

It depends what the media wants to play up. The bishops are not of one mind in approaching this question, and so that division can be played upon, in which case it will be with us. There are some who would say it's a moral theology question about the conscience of the individual. He or she has to be properly instructed, then come to communion in that perspective.

*Meaning that it's their business to make the proper decision?*

Yes, [this view holds] that it's our business to instruct them, it's their business to make the decision. Others would say that it's not entirely that, because there's also public scandal, and therefore the public law of the church comes in. You have a canon that says the minister of communion, not the bishop, is to determine if it's a case of public scandal, then someone is to be refused communion. But that's the minister giving communion on the spot. The bishop can either encourage that or discourage that, I suppose, but in the canon itself it is first of all the minister giving communion at the time who makes that decision ... the celebrant, or the extraordinary minister of the Eucharist, or the deacon, or whoever's giving communion.

*Do you have a policy on that in Chicago?*

A policy that would say what?

*One that would specify under what circumstances someone should or should not be refused communion.*

Our policy is the policy of the church, so if somebody is in a marriage that's not recognized by the church, and the one who gives communion knows, then he or she has no right to give communion because it's a matter of public scandal, assuming that it is public.

*What about a legislator who has voted in favor of a pro-abortion ordinance?*

I don't think you should have a policy on that. I think you should talk first, determine what the state of the person's conscience is, what is in fact going on there. We've done some of that. Of course, when all that is said and done, you have some people whose voting records are scandalous. Of course, in most cases they themselves continue to say, 'I personally accept the church's teaching,' which is the usual criterion for communion. That's the moral theology part of it. The other part is, whether you accept it or not, what you've done is so scandalous that you're not worthy to receive the sacrament. That too is a prudential judgment, on the part of the minister. I don't see how you could have a policy about that.

*So we should not expect a unified position from the conference in terms of a national position?*

We're going to talk about it. I don't know what's possible and what's not.

*But if it's a prudential judgment made by the individual minister, it's difficult to see how you could have a national standard.*

That's what the Code of Canon Law calls it.

*Have you seen Archbishop Raymond Burke's essay in De Re Canonica, in which he argues that we've emphasized canon 916, which talks about the duty of the individual communicant, at the expense of canon 915, about the duty of the minister of the sacrament?*

Yes, I think he argues very persuasively. I think it's a good canonical argument. But pastorally, you still have to decide what this means in the concrete cases we're talking about, so decisions still have to be made. You can point out that this is what the canons say, but what the canon says is that's the minister who does it. It's not first of all a bishop's problem. It has become a bishop's problem, because bishops are arguing about it.

*To take a specific example, if Rudy Giuliani is the Republican nominee and he shows up for Mass in the Archdiocese of Chicago, would you give him communion?*

I don't think he's married in the church, so that's an easy one. We wouldn't even get to the question of his position on abortion.

*Would you agree that both the debates over liturgy and over Catholics in public life are rooted in a push for greater clarity about what makes Catholicism distinct — in other words, Catholic identity?*

Yes, and that's why this argument on the part of Archbishop Burke is persuasive, because there is scandal. It is scandalous that after so many years of the church's constant teaching that you have so many Catholic politicians for whom this is a non-issue. They made up their mind that public policy is one thing and religion is private, and never the twain shall meet. Well, that's a scandal. The question is, do you use a sacramental moment to address that, and risk politicizing the sacrament? That's my biggest concern. The very sacrament that speaks about our unity becomes the occasion for this kind of fracas and disunity. I think we should think long and hard before we allow the Eucharist to become that. There are other ways, even a public declaration that Mr. So-and-So or Mrs. So-and-So is unworthy of receiving communion. After that, you don't put the onus on the minister, it's just out there. If they come to communion, they know. That would be far better than to take that moment of sacramental communion itself, and, you know, the flashbulbs go off. The minister may not even recognize someone coming up. It's a tremendous onus on the minister.

*Though I suspect that if the Republican presidential nominee shows up, people would know who he is.*

I suspect he probably wouldn't bother, this being Chicago!

*But you believe the underlying desire here, to reinforce the borders of proper Catholic identity, is legitimate.*

It's certainly legitimate, of course. It's necessary. The problem is when you get down to a particular instance. The problem is also instrumentalizing the Eucharist and the church, even for a good cause. Worship should never be manipulated by anybody, even for a good cause. Worship is worship, even for a good cause. I feel strongly about that.

*Another area of ferment around identity questions these days is Christology, to what extent traditional Christological doctrines can be pushed to provide space for a positive theological reading of other religions. Why do you think Christology become such a controversial field? Is it Christology as such, or is it God's salvific will for the human race? If you live in Asia, where three percent of the people are Catholic, and the majority of those are Filipinos, this is an obvious issue.*

*Yet the church is growing in parts of Asia, such as India and Korea.*

Very much so. Korea is the only case we know of where a formerly Buddhist country is going to become Christian, Presbyterian and Catholic. There are more vocations than there ever were especially to consecrated life, in India, in the Philippines, in Vietnam, also in Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, we're still talking about a small minority of people, historically and still today. You've got two problems. One is the sheer size of the number of those who never knew who Jesus Christ was. Then you've got a kind of guilty conscience on the part of some academics about Christianity riding on a colonial horse. The initial evangelization was spoiled because the Cross was brought by people who conquered their countries. Those two factors in my reading of some of that literature, and in talking to some of them, create a desire to show that God was truly present to these people even before the colonialists came, and therefore their native religions, whether they're nature religions or historical religions like Buddhism, are vehicles for God's saving all those people.

*Yet it's not just Asians writing on these subjects. Roger Haight, for example, is an American Jesuit.*

That's another whole approach. But in terms of the Asians, this is the point at issue. I don't think any of them would deny ... well, there are a few who would say that there are other possible ways of incarnating God historically, but most of them would say that Jesus remains unique.

*Is the problem just coming from Asia, or is it also that in the West theologians are trying to reinterpret core doctrines in a pluralistic key?*

Pluralism is a Western problem. That's Roger Haight, he's trying to come to terms with pluralism in a secular society. That's a different perspective, even though you end up with the same conclusions.

*Ratzinger said back in the 1990s that the central doctrinal threat of the day was an intersection of Western philosophical relativism with the negative theology of Asia.*

Toynbee said something like that, that the religion of the future would be a cross between Buddhism and a Christianity rooted more in charity than in doctrine. It's something to watch, of course.

*Let me ask a procedural question. Granted that real issues are at stake, many critics would say that when the Holy See goes after someone in a disciplinary process, it freezes the normal academic give-and-take, and that it would be better to allow the self-correcting mechanisms of theological debate to play out. Do you think there's merit to that criticism?*

It would be more credible if, before the Holy See said anything, the academic community did react with anything other than kudos to the most aberrant kind of Christologies that are presented.

*But to take Haight as an example, there were some fairly critical reactions to his book.*

Well, then the Holy See wasn't saying anything new. They were just backing up the theologians who were critical.

*Yes, but at least some observers believe the news that he was under investigation froze most of that in place.*

It did and it didn't. It becomes a different kind of conversation. You have to ask, how much of the theological community is influenced by the academic subculture rather than the dynamics of a discipline that says it's entirely subservient to the service of truth? Too often it's as if, when you criticize somebody's ideas, therefore you're criticizing the person. You can't do anything that way. You're saying that every time you question somebody, you're attacking the person. That's the end of all discussion and all judgment. We have to accept people, but there's nothing that says you have to accept everything they say just because you want to respect them. But that's the way it goes very quickly. I remember a conversation years ago put to Cardinal Ratzinger in those terms. [A theologian asked], 'Who are my accusers?' He answered, 'Your books.' That's the point, it's a consideration of the books and we can separate ideas from those who espouse them.

*You think that the Holy See initiating an investigation does not have an adverse effect on normal academic debate?*

Of course it does, but normal academic debate is not normative for the church. The magisterium of the church has an obligation to see to it that the truths of the faith are presented accurately. That would be the case whether there's an academy involved, whether universities were ever invented, whatever. This is the age-old job of the teaching magisterium of the church. It would be nice if it were allowed to work in its own world, but no world is isolated, so it has to work also in the popular press, in academic life, in a lot of areas. But you can't say that because the academics will react, therefore the Holy See shouldn't do its job.

*But that still leaves the question of making good judgments about how to do its job. To take a concrete case, the notification on Dupuis came out in January 2001. Looking back, would you say it's had a positive effect on theological discussion?*

I think that's an intervention that wasn't thought out well enough before it was made. I think the discussion that followed after the intervention should have taken place before the intervention was made.

*What about the Haight notification, which came out in February 2005? Has it had any positive effect that you see?*

I don't know, because I'm not close enough to those discussions. I would hope that it would mean that people who teach theology in university faculties would think twice about using a book like that, or they would use it as an example of how not to do Christology. It isn't adequate to the faith of the church. There are many good things to it, because Haight is a very smart man. There's a lot in there we can all profit from. But the fundamental argument about the significance of Jesus is not only not advanced by that book, it's distorted. It's good [for someone] to say that.

*One twist to the latest case of Peter Phan is that he seems to be facing two parallel investigations, one from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and one from the doctrinal commission of the United States bishops' conference. Can you shed any light on that?*  
 I wish I could help you with that, because it's unclear to me too, but I haven't asked the question. I'm an advisor to the doctrinal commission, but I haven't followed that argument because I haven't read the book.

*Is there a move these days to try to handle more of these cases at the local level rather than dealing with them from Rome?*

I think that's clear. Cardinal Ratzinger, when he was head of the congregation, asked that the doctrinal committees of the various bishops' conferences do their own work for cases of problematic theological works in their own countries. The present prefect is certainly following that advice, and is going to be asking more and more, would you please attend to this yourself? Why should every case like this become a case for the Holy See?

*Whether at the Vatican or at lower levels, some critics say that official judgments about theological works sometimes reflect an overly narrow theological outlook. What's your view?*  
 You have to be sure you're interpreting the book correctly, which takes some time. You always have to be fair to the author. I'm not sure who the CDF draws on. But you've got a very, very large theological community in Rome itself. They also use people who are not in Rome, and I've known some of them from time to time. I suspect the circle of advisors is actually pretty broad.

*So how do you explain what happened with Dupuis?*

I think that was an unfortunate example, but I don't think it's typical. I think that by the time the process is over, usually there is a careful reading. The initial reaction might be too broad, but that's the purpose of bringing the author, the theologian, into the discussion, to make sure that you're not misrepresenting them.

*Finally, assuming that your brother bishops elect you as president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, is it your intention to accept?*

I think that if you put your name forward, obviously you have to accept if you're elected. The time to make that decision is when they ask if you'll be put on the list.

*So if elected, you'll serve?*

I put my name forward, so of course.

*Did you either ask for or receive any counsel from the Vatican as to whether you should stand for the office of president?*

No, the Holy See in my experience never enters into those discussions. ... But you know, the person who runs the conference administratively is the General Secretary. The president runs the meeting, and is the president of the bishops' conference, which means you can speak for it at times when it's not assembled. It's more a symbolic role than an administrative role. The people who are hired, for example, are chosen by the General Secretary, not the bishops.

*But from a PR point of view, you become the face of the church in the United States.*

Yes, and that's scary in a way, because symbol becomes more important than function very often. It is a symbolic post. It's a tremendous responsibility, and you can make mistakes, and that's something to be considered. But you can also shape a conversation sometimes, and say something that would be helpful.

*Any particular conversation you're looking forward to shaping?*  
Catholic identity is a good place to start.