



New York Cultural Center

Face to Face with... John Allen!

**A Dialogue with Journalist John L. ALLEN, Jr.,
Senior Vatican Analyst for CNN and
National Catholic Reporter, Senior Correspondent**

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*transcript not reviewed by the author

Simmonds: Good evening, and welcome on behalf of Crossroads New York Cultural Center and the Columbia Catholic Ministry. Before I let Msgr. Albacete introduce tonight's discussion with our distinguished guest, I would like to make just one simple comment about why we are truly delighted to meet and dialogue with John Allen. The reason is simple: we think that John is one of the most important journalists in the US today who specializes in covering the life of the Catholic Church. And why is that? The principal reason, in our view, is not his extensive network of contacts, or the quality of his reporting and writing skills, and so on. In our opinion, the primary reason why John has shined in the firmament of Catholic journalism over the last few years is much more basic. As soon as he started writing from Rome for the *National Catholic Reporter* in 2000, it became obvious to everybody that here was somebody dedicated to reporting what is happening in the Church, offering both a wealth of information and a balanced judgment. If that sounds banal to you, perhaps you have not noticed that over the last 40 or 50 years, roughly since the time of the Council, the professional vocation of many of John's colleagues has not been primarily to describe what the Church IS, but rather what the Church SHOULD BE. Even in the Catholic press, much of the reporting about the Vatican has often been tinted with ideological preconceptions. Accordingly, it has been very hard to read anything about Church life without perceiving that we are being exposed to some variety of either "liberal" or "conservative" agendas. Not that there is anything wrong, mind you, with having a "working hypothesis" about what is happening. But our prejudices should not prevent us from looking at reality. And this is where John has made a real difference. From the beginning his work has shown that, whatever his own opinions may be, first of all he wants to know, he is curious about what is happening in the Church. This simple desire to know the reality of the Church, rather than to confirm his own preconceptions, is what has made him a great journalist. Msgr. Luigi Giussani, at the beginning of his book on the Church, remarked that the Church is first of all *A LIFE* that propagates itself throughout the centuries of human history. John's columns always reflect a passion to describe this life as it unfolds, and for this we thank him.

Albacete: The most important thing about our guest tonight here is himself. He is here because what he does is very interesting and fascinating and he has achieved a lot, so he becomes interesting. So my first question, John, is this: Talk to me about little John Allen. Were you always interested in journalism? How did you begin to be interested in specializing in “religious issues” or, in particular, the Catholic Church?

Allen: Well, first of all, I want to challenge your assumption that the most interesting thing we’re going to talk about tonight is me because I can assure you that it isn’t.

Albacete: Such humility on your part!

Allen: But I’ll answer your question. This is embarrassing to say in a place like Columbia where I’m in such distinguished company, but I’m a complete academic phony. I never took a course in journalism in my life! I never had any interest in becoming a journalist really, and I’ll pick up the story. When I was a novice with the Trinitarians, and after about nine months, (which is about how long you told me it took you to understand that the University of Puerto Rico was not for you), I had a similar realization about religious life. I’d like to tell you I had some deep mystical insight, but the truth is I grew up as an only child and I didn’t like anybody telling me what time to get up and when to pray and who I had to share a room with, and I figured, you know, if that’s who I am, religious life is probably not for me. And so I then did what everyone in the world does when you’ve sort of decided one thing isn’t working and you’re not sure what the next thing is, which is I went to graduate school. I got a master’s degree in religion from the University of Kansas. I grew up in Kansas so that’s where I could pay in-state tuition. It was a very lovely program, but let me tell you, the single greatest thing about that program was that it was where I met my wife Shannon who is here with us tonight. Yes, round of applause please! Actually, the masters in religious studies at KU I really think is to some extent a matchmaking service because a lot of people actually cross paths that way. We met in a class called “Mother as a Religious Metaphor.”

Let me pick up the story. So, in any event, I got a graduate degree in religion. Then the question became: Well, what in the world do you do with a graduate degree in religion? Of course what you do with a master’s degree in religion is you pursue a doctorate in religion—delay the day of reckoning as long as you possibly can! So I went to Los Angeles....I was going to write for Jim Robinson, Burton Mack and a bunch of other things, and in the meantime, the need to pay the bills arose, as it often will, and so I was looking for a part-time job, and with a graduate degree in religion the only job I could think of to get was teaching in a Catholic high school, and I figured, well, you know, they finish at three o’clock. That’s a part-time job. I have never worked as hard in my life. I am here to tell you that my hat is off to educators because I worked like a dog. It was great. I was hired to teach religion. As it happened, this Catholic high school had a very small student newspaper, and that’s actually glorifying it because it was an eight and a half by eleven piece of paper that they photocopied on a mimeograph machine. But they had a journalism class and they needed someone to teach it. In the grand tradition of Catholic secondary education, they weren’t willing to pay for anyone who actually knew what they were doing. I remember to this day in my interview with the principal, David Doyle, he asked me, “What’s your background in journalism?” To which my answer was, “Well, I read the paper.” And his answer was, “Terrific, you’re our guy.” This was August. It was the week school started, so I dredged up some very vague memories of working on the student newspaper in high

school myself, and sort of tried to fake it, and in the course of doing that, over the course of four years, progressively I came to envy my students; that is, I wanted to be the one out doing stories and running down the news and writing the analysis and so on. So I started freelancing at a few places, and one of the places I started freelancing was *The National Catholic Reporter*.

In 1997 they offered me a job as opinion editor, which I took, not because I wanted to be the opinion editor but because it was a way to get paid to do this. And relatively quickly, again over about a nine month period, two things became clear. One is that I could edit, and the other is that I didn't want to. And so then the question became, well, we have this guy, and now what do we do with him? Now bear in mind that this was 1997. Like every other media organization in the world, NCR was convinced that John Paul was going to drop dead next Wednesday, and so they were desperate to have somebody in Rome and they tried several different things and it wasn't working out. So eventually these two things dovetailed and they figured, well, we've got this guy, we need something to do with him, and we perceive a need in Rome, so let's ask him if he's willing to go work there. So they asked me would I be willing to take an assignment in Rome. Now folks, when you cover the Catholic Church, and somebody comes to you and says, "Would you like to go to Rome?" this is like playing for the Durham Bulls and somebody asks you, "Do you want to go to Yankee Stadium?" I mean, the obvious answer to that question is "Yes." And so I went over for a kind of dry run over in the European Synod in October of 1999, and didn't make a complete fool of myself, so we moved over in the summer of 2000 and that's where we were.

In answer to your question, there was never any plan, there was never any design to do this, and frankly it's just as well that there wasn't because the truth is the universe of people in the English-speaking world who cover the Vatican or who cover the global Catholic Church is extraordinarily small—I mean, in Rome you could probably count us, even when we were at our peak, you could probably count us at about ten people who did this on a full-time basis. But it's not like there's a help wanted ad in *Osservatore Romano* for this kind of thing. And everybody I know just kind of stumbled into it. Nobody said, "I'm going to do it." So, anyway, there we go.

Albacete: Well, fine. You know, you could have stumbled into it at a different time. It's amazing and wonderful, actually, fascinating. This is historically one of the most interesting times of the Church. I know you could have run *The Catholic New Yorker* during the Spellman years and one could acknowledge an ongoing controversy. I speak because I'm one of the founders of *The National Catholic Reporter*, I'll have you know. I sent them one hundred dollars at the initial campaign back in the sixties to start the NCR. At that time I believed that it would benefit the Church to be exposed to the spotlight, so to speak, by a newspaper that was not in some way an official organ of the diocese or religious order, or the Vatican, etc. A newspaper, as I saw it, with an agenda to report none other than what was going on. Well, is that still thinkable? Is it possible to achieve such neutrality? You refer in one of your recent columns to your detachment with respect to a reality like the Church that makes such kind of claims that really concern each one of us. And secondly, related to that, a discussion at that time that should the name Catholic be in the title of such a newspaper and in what way is it a Catholic newspaper? That kind of discussion.

Allen: I had not wanted to speak on behalf of NCR, so I'll talk about myself. I often refer to myself as a journalist who happens to be Catholic as opposed to a Catholic journalist. And I may be splitting hairs here, but I suppose my conviction is that journalism is essentially a secular interest; that is to say, its principles, the criteria by which one distinguishes quality work from

shock work don't arise in any direct sense from the gospel. They come from the canons of western journalism. Very basic things like factual accuracy, fairness, diligence, etc., etc. In this case that skill set happens to be applied in the Catholic Church. Frankly, I'm always a bit nervous about journalists who describe themselves as Catholic journalists because it seems to me that the tribe of Catholic journalists out there tends to fracture into one of two tendencies. Either there's the embittered, angry, chip-on-your-shoulder Catholic journalist who is frustrated with the Church and wants to push it towards reform, whatever variety of reform this person happens to believe in. Or there's the sort of evangelizing Catholic journalists who frankly see themselves much more like the fifth gospel writer as opposed to the fourth of state. And both of these tendencies are perfectly defensible. God knows the Church needs always to be reformed and it needs people to make those arguments, and it also needs people who will preach its message to a spiritually hungry world. So they're both legitimate impulses, I'm just not sure either one of them makes for very good journalism. Because I think when you start a story with a pre-trained idea of how it ought to come out, it inevitably colors how you approach it. It colors what questions you ask, who you talk to, and so on and so forth. So this is all in the way of saying that, yes, I'm convinced that one can honor the professional discipline, to caption it as we understand it, in the craft of journalism and cover Catholicism.

Now, on the other hand, I think part of the discipline is understanding that the Catholic Church is unlike any other institution you might cover. It is not like City Hall, it is not like the Pentagon, it is not like the White House, in that it makes a set of claims that are entirely transcendent about itself. If you don't appreciate that and you don't understand that the people who are running this institution and moving in it are operating according to a logic that is very different from the logic of modern secularity, then you're going to get a lot of things wrong. This is one of the reasons that so much coverage of the Catholic Church sort of has this red state / blue state tendency. They're sort of seeing it through the lens of secular politics because a lot of people think that that logic, either they don't understand it exists or they think it's all sort of pious chatter. And so I think if you don't understand and appreciate the claims that the Church makes for itself and understand, at a bare minimum, that those claims are embraced by most of the people who are making things happen in the Church, then you're going to get it wrong. So I think you have to understand and appreciate that about the Church, but in principle, I don't think you necessarily have to personally subscribe to those claims...to put it differently, I do not think you have to be Catholic to be a good journalist about the Catholic Church. My case in point would be the veteran Vatican writer for *The Associated Press*, Victor Simpson, who is Jewish and I think does a terrific job, and there are other examples. So I think you'd have to understand the way you describe the Church, but I don't think you necessarily have to personally accept it in order to get the job right.

Albacete: Well, I have found that a lot of what appears to be anti-Catholic bias is a shocking ignorance about Catholicism and Catholic history. I've often told people at the news media that I have volunteered to cover the Super Bowl because I am just as prepared to do that as they seem to be prepared to do Catholic issues. In Europe I find it somewhat different. Even newspapers not known for friendliness towards what they see as the Catholic agenda, nonetheless seem to have a seriousness that doesn't reduce it to a political debate between conservatives and liberals, but is aware that there is a depth involved here and a history out of which this comes. You have lived in Rome and are familiar with the guys in Europe covering the Church, the Vatican. How do you compare it to American journalists?

Allen: Well, first of all, your point about the superficiality and the lack of background of a lot of journalistic coverage of Church matters... Also with us tonight is Delia Gallagher, Faith and Values Correspondent from CNN. And Delia and I shared a lot of very long hours during the conclave doing coverage for the papal transition and so on. I don't know if you remember, Delia, but one of the moments that just came to my mind is that when I just got done doing the old Aaron Brown show, the news thing, which I think finished at 4 am Rome time, and they said, "We want you to stay in position because we want to get some bites for packages we're going to be doing tomorrow." So they asked me a series of four or five fairly inane questions and at the end they said, "Do you have anything else?" And the producer came on and said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, what we need is about a 25-30 second bite. Could you explain to us the difference between Catholics and Protestants?" In 25 seconds. "Yeah, we got the Pope, they don't. Fill up the rest of the time with whatever you want."

Of course the truth is, particularly when we're talking about television, there is a sort of institutional amnesia, an incapacity to remember anything that happened even yesterday about what broadcast coverage because people who do TV are covering absolutely everything that happens and they're doing it at an inhuman pace. I don't think that's anymore true of the States than it is of Europe. As far as print journalism goes, you know when you say you think that European coverage is better informed, I don't know if you're thinking primarily Italy. I would grant you that about Italy. In my opinion, the British coverage of religion is the worst coverage of religion anywhere in the world in any language. It is abysmal. I've actually written on the subject. Not only is there ignorance; there is callous indifference to facts. Even when the facts are staring you in the face, they will nevertheless craft stories that present utterly misleading images because religion is considered a cult. It's like covering Carnival in Rio. It doesn't really matter what you write. It's just being cute that is the point. I would say that in Germany much of the press coverage of the Catholic Church is still informed by the dynamics of the Protestant Reformation so it tends to be better informed but often somewhat hostile in terms of coverage of Catholicism, so I think it's very different.

I'll tell you this about the difference between Italian journalism and American journalism. Here's the basic difference. In Italy, journalists are remembered by what they give away whereas in the States we're remembered by what we did wrong. I could have done ten stories in the last week that are absolutely unassailable, but if I do a story tomorrow saying that the Vatican is going to put out a document next Tuesday on the Latin mass, and it doesn't happen, it will be what everyone remembers because Allen got it wrong. In Italy it's the exact opposite dynamic. You can write the story that the Vatican is going to put out a document on X, and you can do it twenty times, and no one will remember it, and if it happens on the twenty-first time, you will be the guy who got it right.

I'll tell you a classic story in this regard. A colleague of ours, who used to write for *Messaggero* was infamous for doing stories like this, predicting things that we're going to happen and sometimes they did, sometimes they didn't. I remember back in 2003 a cardinal celebrated the Tridentine Rite mass in the Basilica of St. Mary Major. This was the first time that a rite according to the missal of 1962 had been celebrated in one of the basilicas in Rome since the Council. And a colleague of ours wrote a story in *Messaggero* saying, "This is going to mark the end of the Lefebvrite Schism. Tomorrow at this mass the Lefebvrites are going to come marching back into communion with the Roman Catholic Church." I knew this was staggeringly improbable, but more to the point, all it took was a five-minute call to the seminary, the Society

of St. Pius X, and a fellow in Switzerland in a kind of a rage denied that this was true. So I knew it wasn't true, and in fact the mass came and went; it didn't happen. A few weeks later we were getting ready to leave on a papal trip and I was in the departure lounge in the airport and I ran into this journalist. He's a friend of mine, and I said, "Look, what happened to that story about the Lefebvrites? You know, it didn't happen." His answer, and I think this is the epigrammatic kind of synthesis of Italian journalism boiled into one lapidary phrase, he said to me, "In giornalismo, ogni tanto si rischia." [Laughter] Obviously we're in a CL crowd. People know what that means. For those of you who don't, what it means is, loosely translated, "In journalism, every now and then you have to take a shot." And that tends to be the spirit, I would say, of a lot of Italian, and not just Italian, a lot of coverage in the Church in many European cultures. The tendency is to sort of construct hypotheses and speculate about what might be happening and then report them as if they're real. That's the culture and I think most people in that culture understand it and they take it with a grain of salt. The really dangerous thing is when reporters who don't know better in the Anglo-Saxon world pick up those stories and then start circulating them here as if they're describing anything that's really happening. And I can forgive that for people who've been in Rome six months and don't know any better and that happens. I don't forgive it so easily for people who write for British papers that have been in Rome for twenty-five years and still do it. Long answer to a short question.

Albacete: Fine. The ignorance is not only concerning matters interior to the Catholic Church, but the role of the Church, the part the Church plays in issues that are not religious but entirely secular—I have in mind, for example, the question of Latin America. I haven't followed all the debates for the 910 candidates for president we have. I have not heard any single question concerning Latin American policy from any of these people. On the other hand, during the battles in El Salvador and Nicaragua, Brazil, etc., I was present at the Oval Office when President Reagan asked a Latin American prelate why the Latin American bishops allowed a Maryknoll order to be so involved with the debt in these countries. Reagan obviously had no idea what the Maryknoll order was. But the question was there. Somebody prepared it. Suddenly there was enough interest in the Catholic Church to know the name of a specific order. Now, after the end of the Cold War, Latin America disappeared from the scene, but yet it's beginning to come alive again with leftist governments in Venezuela and so forth. In this context we have, for example, the meeting a few weeks ago last month of the Holy Father, of CELAM, of Aparecida, which you attended, right?

Allen: Well, I was on the paper trail.

Albacete: And later on you can tell us about the meals on the papal trip.

Allen: Very disappointing.

Albacete: Is it true that cardinals are like flight attendants? That's what I heard.

Allen: And they're very hungry for tips.

Albacete: Yes, I'm sure they are. Again, nothing that I know happened that may have justified a deep analysis in the American press or on television.

Allen: That's probably because there were 5,000 words about it.

Albacete: I believe that this was a very important meeting and yet I wonder whether the US government is attentive to the role played by the Church in these matters, not religious matters, but matters that sooner or later come to touch on the interest of the United States. Another issue that depends partly on what happens in Latin America is the issue of immigration. It's the same thing. Tell me about that. You went on the trip. Tell me about it.

Allen: So you want me to talk about the papal trip?

Albacete: No, not about the trip itself. In your opinion, did anything significant take place in Aparecida? And second, what should we know about it in terms of life in the United States?

Allen: Well, let me take the second question first. What should we know about it in terms of life in the United States? Well let me answer that we're Catholic in the first place as opposed to just an American citizen. One statistic I am fond of trotting out in front of an American Catholic audience is the following: There are a little over 1.1 billion Roman Catholics in the world today. There are roughly 70 million Roman Catholics, according to the latest count, in the United States which means that we are roughly 6% of the world's Roman Catholic population. To put that number differently, 94% of the Catholics in the world in significant ways are not like us, and if Catholic ecclesiology means anything, it means seeing ourselves as part of a broad communion that goes across time and through space, and therefore it means trying to think beyond American provincials. And so you ask why should we as Americans be concerned about CELAM? I would say that the short version of that answer is that we're Catholic and that's what it means to be Catholic. We are concerned about the fate of the Church in other places and we open ourselves, at least in principle, to learning about it. So that's one way to get at your question.

Now, did anything important happen in CELAM? Well, it depends on how you define important. Is there anything that came out of it that is going to rock our world in terms of Catholic affairs in the near term? No. The Latin American bishops called for what they are calling "a grand continental mission" premised on the observation that it only took them about forty years to arrive at which is, number one, there is a substantial percentage of the nominally Roman Catholic population in Latin America whose last contact in any meaningful sense with the Catholic Church was their baptism. They have been un-evangelized, unformed and left to drift. And if you want a capitalist analysis of this, this is what being in a monopoly will do to you. It puts you to sleep. And the reason that now the bishops are becoming sensitive to that is because they no longer are a monopoly. There are significant defections throughout Latin America and not just the Pentecostals, by the way. That's what we read about and hear about. I mean, Pentecostals are sexy these days. But really the significant movement of Catholics to Pentecostals happened in the 80s and 90s. From 1980 to 2000 the percentage of the Latin American population that's Protestant, almost overwhelmingly Pentecostal, went from 12% to 17%; that is, 5% birth, whereas in the previous twenty years it had gone from slightly over 2% to 12%. So in other words, explosive birth followed by slow birth.

But the real concern I would suggest these days is the percentage of the Latin American population that is professing no religious belief at all. You can take Brazil, for example. In 1980, the percentage of the Brazilian population that said they had no religious affiliations—0.7%. Today it's 8.2%. And that is a dramatic birth in a period of just twenty years. Really what is happening is that religious non-affiliation, for the first time in Latin American history, is

becoming a mass phenomenon. And it's not secularization in the Lessing sense—this isn't an intellectual decision in favor of Agnosticism, or a rejection of institutional religion. It really is an index of hopelessness. These are people who have given up, not just on religion—they've given up on virtually everything. That is, they have no confidence in politics, they have no confidence in civil society, they have no confidence in religion. These are largely the terribly marginalized and virtually abandoned urban poor or peripheries of these new Latin American mega-states.

Anyway, the point is, again to use mercantilist language, the Church is losing marketship, okay? Now, over the course of the last thirty-five years, it has been the tendency of the Latin American bishops to blame outside forces. First they blamed aggressive and well-financed Protestant missionaries from the United States for causing these defections, not noticing actually that the forms of Pentecostalism that have grown the most rapidly and have had the most dramatic success are those that have no ties whatsoever to American missionaries. Then they blamed the American governments saying it was a project of the Reagan administration to subvert Catholicism in Latin America and replace it with Congregationalist Protestantism on the grounds that that would be more congenial to free market capitalism. I think that radically oversells the capacity of the Reagan administration or any American administration.... Finally, at Aparecida the first time, there was a kind of blunt, candid assessment. "The fault is not in our stars; it is in ourselves." We have abandoned our people. We have left them adrift, and we've got to do something about it. So I think that is a very healthy thing.

Now, the bad news is that this great continental mission that they have called for is going to be this dramatic gesture on the part of the bishops to re-evangelize the continent of Latin America. Five minutes after they decided to do that, they got locked into debates as to whether CELAM actually had the authority to do that, or is that something local bishops' conferences and individual bishops have to do, and who could want this initiative and who would have control over it? And so essentially they announced a mission and then decided they would get together at the Vatican in July to figure out the details. I'm personally skeptical that much is going to happen in terms of a unified continental effort. I think some dioceses will pick this up and run with it and others won't.

If you're looking for other news out of the conference, I would say the language on ecumenism was quite distinct. Ecumenism has not been a strong suit of Latin American Catholicism—another result of being a monopoly for a long period of time and having often hostile relationships with Pentecostals. This is really the first time that you can find the Latin American bishops as a body committing themselves to ecumenical endeavors.

Language on environmentalism was very strong, which reflects, I think, a sort of growing shift in attitudes. For a long time many of the Latin American bishops were skeptical of western, especially American and European environmentalism because they thought what that meant was allowing the developed nations of the world to keep putting out high-powered gas and so forth, but preventing them from doing it, and therefore impeding the possibilities of economic development in the south. I think now, seeing what's happened in the Amazon and elsewhere, that's changed. Now, these are powerful statements. What will come from them I don't know.

Finally, let me say just a couple words about the papal trip as distinct from the CELAM meeting. Benedict XVI went to Brazil in part to make a pastoral visit to Brazil. Only in the last day of his trip did he actually open the conference of the bishops of Latin America. There were three big

news flashes, or should I say moderate-sized news flashes that came out of the pope's trip. The first actually came in the papal plane on the way to Brazil when he took a question about abortion and pro-choice Catholic politicians. He essentially said that he believed that a politician who consistently does not vote with the Church on this question should not receive communion. Second, I would say, came when he went to a world center for recovering drug addicts and essentially called down the wrath of God on drug dealers. So "Pope Against Pushers" was that day's headline. The third, of course, came at the very end when he gave his speech at the opening of the CELAM conference and he said that Christianity was not an imposition upon the native cultures of the new world.

Now, if you want, I can pick apart each one of those stories, but I want to make this claim. If you take those in isolation, which is what most secular news coverage did, these seem unrelated, kind of random episodes that kind of seem hard to explain. But if you actually read what Benedict said in Brazil in context, it's very clear that from the first moment of that trip to the very end there was a consistent theme running through all of this. I would say that Brazil, in a sense, was a kind of practical application of the argument that he made in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*. Let me take a step back from that and say I think you can make a case that no pope has ever been as prepared for a foreign trip, other than John Paul going to Poland, as Benedict XVI was going to Brazil. Bear in mind that Brazil has been on his brain since the late 1970s in the initial battles over Liberation Theology. So many of the great figures of Liberation Theology—Boff, Casaldáliga, Helder Camara, all of those figures, they were all Brazilians. Brazil was the crucible in which Liberation Theology was formed. Ratzinger, and now Pope Benedict, has been thinking about Brazil as a metaphor for that instinct in Catholicism for quite some time, and I think, therefore, you have to read the Brazil trip as the mature fruit of his meditation on the issues raised by Liberation Theology.

So, to come back, his consistent theme throughout the entire trip was: You are concerned about poverty and social injustice. So am I. But I'm here to tell you that if you begin by attempting to change social reality, you will inevitably get it wrong because the beginning has to be Christ. The truth about the proper design—the meaning and destiny of human existence—was revealed in Jesus Christ. So preaching Christ in that sense is not an alternative or replacement for working for social justice, it IS working for social justice. Because the pattern of a just human life, and therefore a pattern of a just society, is revealed in Christ, and if we don't get that right, then everything else we do, however valuable and important it may be in and of itself, is going to be skewed. So his comments about abortion—now this is an analysis, this is what a society that is built "as if God does not exist" looks like. His denunciation of drug dealing, again, how could a society go so badly wrong as to trample upon human dignity in the way that those who push drugs do? Finally, the comments about Christ not being external to indigenous cultures. People sort of got that wrong because they thought he was saying that the colonizers weren't crooks. Well, of course that's not what he meant. He knows that Christians often behave atrociously. His point was not that Christians didn't impose themselves. His point was that Christ didn't impose himself. Christ cannot be external to a culture because He is the fulfillment, in his view, to which everything in culture points. And so this is the golden thread, if you like, which I think pulls together those disparate moments of the trip into a coherent whole.

Now, is that important? Well, I think it's important to know the mind of the pope and I think it's important to understand how that's likely to inform his political interests, his theological

interests, and so on. Are you going to be reading about it on the front page of *The New York Times* tomorrow? Probably not.

Albacete: I think it's not only important in that way. I think the whole future of the Catholic Church as a significant factor in the life of the world depends upon understanding the very point that you described so well, and I notice in all the pronouncements of the pope this link. You brought it to the book. If by chance you want to say something about that later, fine. But you can see it there, and you can see it all from the very beginning, certainly *Deus Caritas Est*, which surprised many people. If you read it in this context you will see why it is the first encyclical. And then going back to all the experiences that you made reference to, about this point, and his repeated insistence that without Christ it's a cruel world in which human rights cannot exist.

Allen: If you want me to put it in a sound bite I would say, what anthropology was to John Paul, Christology is to this pope. In other words, it is the focal point, the message that he believes he has been providentially placed in this position to bring to the world at this time.

Albacete: Well, it kind of fits the job description of the successor of Peter anyway. I'm glad they're paying attention to Christology.

Allen: Well I'm sure he'll be pleased to know he has your approval. He's always asking for you. What is Albacete saying about it?

Albacete: He's copying my ideas. I'm suing!

Allen: The Holy See in a sovereign state. Better people than you and I have tried to breach that one.

Albacete: Well, we'll see. Now, look, because this is crucial. It's so crucial that I forgot about it. Anyway, let's go back to the United States. What I want to say is that these things that the pope has said in Latin America apply not only in Latin America, but all over the world for the Catholic Church. Anyway, it's a further clarification of a growing awareness that I can see going back to the end of the Council until today that leads eventually to the new evangelization and then a clearer vision, a simplification, etc., etc...Now the focus on Christology, it's almost like a Christological cosmology, it's not only anthropology in his Easter speeches—the Resurrection of Christ is compared to an evolutionary leap, to nuclear fission—I mean, it is the centrality that Christ is not just an object of piety, but the very meaning of this world, of this very world, and you cannot take in or out this Presence without real effects in this world. I think this is a great insight, but I think we need more to clarify. I think this is a great contribution Benedict XVI will make to the ongoing history of the Church. Do you think I'm crazy?

Allen: Yes. Not for that reason.

Albacete: Not for that reason, okay. Now look, there are a number of Catholics in important political posts in the United States from the new Supreme Court to Madame Pelosi. What is your view of the role of American Catholics in the political arena today?

Allen: Is that a polite way of asking about the communion thing?

Albacete: No. It's asking about your view of the role American Catholics play—if it's zero, if it's a discussion of communion, then that's all there is to it. But is there more? And I've noticed that all these people, there are all these Catholics who have a presence in the government today from right to left. It's amazing! It's not a single little post. Is there a Catholic, I don't want to use the word "vote," but is there a Catholic political orientation, or is that shattered?

Allen: Well, actually, the question about whether there is a Catholic vote is not a bad way to get into thinking about this, and you'll recall in the 2004 election the immediate take was that there was a Catholic vote and that it made a difference. George Bush, as you probably know, won 53% of the overall Catholic vote in 2004. He won 57% of those Catholics who attend mass at least once a week, and for those Catholics who identify themselves as going to mass daily, he got almost 60%. In other words, the more often you went to mass, the more likely you were to vote for Bush in 2004. The feeling among many analysts immediately after that election was that that faith and values block which was driven to some extent by Catholics, made an enormous difference.

Now, I had subsequently read a lot of analysis that would dispute that, that would argue that if you looked at the Catholic vote in every election since 1960, you will find that within a range of variants of about two to five points, the Catholic vote paralleled the overall national vote. That is to say that the 1960 election, which was Kennedy, was the last time that the Catholic vote was significantly out of alignment with the overall national vote, and after that, basically speaking, Catholics have voted like other Americans do. I'm thinking particularly of a political scientist at Santa Clare who has written extensively on this. In his conclusion, basically, what drives voting behavior for the vast majority of American Catholics is ideology. That is to say, Catholics by and large do not go into the polling booth and perceive themselves to be voting as Catholics. They perceive themselves to be voting for the candidate of their ideological preference. Is there a distinctive Catholic vote? I would say the jury is very much out. Obviously there are intentional Catholics out there who will make choices based on that, but are they numerically significant enough to have an impact on the outcome of elections? I'm not sure.

In terms of the role of Catholic politicians, I think all we could say there is the evidence would suggest that there too is a mixed bag. Clearly there are people out there like Rick Santorum, to take one example, or Casey from Pennsylvania to take another, or an even better example would be Tim Kaine from Virginia. Santorum being a very conservative, right-wing Republican, and Tim Kaine being a sort of moderate to left-wing Democrat. Both of these guys are extraordinarily serious about their Catholicism, and I think the reflection on their Catholicism obviously influences their public policy choices, in different directions in a sense. Santorum, although he's not a member of Opus Dei, is a devotee of Msgr. Josemaria Escriva. I would say half the speeches he's given in the last ten years probably have one or more references to Escriva. Kaine was a Maryknoll lay missionary in Honduras for about five years working with the poorest of the poor in Honduras, and that clearly has shaped his imagination about the need to combat poverty, about the role of Latin America, about the capacity of faith-based organizations to devote to these things.

Does that describe most Catholics in public life? I would say, probably not. My impression, having interviewed a lot of these people, is that the average Catholic politician doesn't know a great deal more about the Church than say the average Catholic journalist or the average Catholic truck driver, whatever slice of life you might mention.

John Neuhaus and others used to argue, ten or fifteen years ago, that there was a coming Catholic moment in American public policy, a moment when a kind of newly self-conscious Catholic Church would engage with like-minded ecumenical partners, and I think Neuhaus had particularly in mind the evangelical church, and that it would transform the American political scene. I would say that, for the most part, it really has not happened. I think you can see episodic flashes of individuals in movements that kind of cropped up and had a kind of momentary impact, but is there any evidence that the increasing participation of Catholics in public life in this country has fundamentally transformed its politics? No. And to extend on that, I would say that far from the Church transforming American politics, I would submit to you that it's American politics that has transformed the Church. Where does this idea that we American Catholics should splinter into left and right come from? It certainly doesn't come out of Catholic ecclesiology. It comes out of the psychology and the discourse of secular politics. And where is the tendency to treat the Church as the terrain upon which interest group battles are fought come from? It doesn't come out of the inner logic of Roman Catholicism. It comes out of the way we are taught to act and to think by the broader culture.

I remember once I was at a conference organized by Ron Rolheiser, who is a terrific spiritual writer. This conference was for missionary workers who had been awakened to the fact that the new missionary territory today isn't the pagan babies in Africa. It's our own back yard, our own inability to transfer the faith to our own children. And so they had this three-day conference, the point of which was, honest to God, the question they were asking was: How do we find secularity so we can talk to it? Ladies and Gentlemen, secularity is in this room. We are secularity. It is the air we breathe. We are the sons and daughters of the secular world. In this group there was the same kind of tendency to make snap, a priori, ideological judgments about who in the Church was on the side of the angels and who wasn't—trying to decide who is on our side and who isn't. Who's in what camp? And that is secularism in action. And this is not exactly the question you asked, but my thesis would be that it is not that the Church has in any measurable way evangelized politics. It is rather that politics, in a very significant way, has evangelized the Church.

Albacete: No, it's very much what I wanted to hear from you, to discuss this. Winding down, in the light of all of this, your column on Fr. Finn's speech of the CTSA is interesting and you were very excited about it, calling it "potentially transformative," and I haven't had yet a chance to read the text, but it's kind of exciting. Would you like to say something about it in light of the kind of discussion we've been having.

Allen: Sure. For those of you who don't hang on my every word, let me give you some background. The speech that Monsignor is referring to is by a guy by the name of Daniel Finn who is a theologian and also an economist, which is a combination that we ought to have more of. He teaches at St. John's in Minnesota. Dan was the out-going president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, which is the major umbrella for Catholic theologians in the United States. For those of you who pay attention to these things, you will know that for a number of years the CTSA has been both a symbol of, and I would say in some ways an agent of the ideological polarization of the American Church. I would say most people perceive it to be basically a left-wing outfit, and some would see it as giving aid and comfort to dissenters, and so on. These impressions come out of things like the fact that in 1997 the CTSA put out a document challenging the Church's teaching on women's ordination, and so on. Basically any time the

Vatican puts out a doctrinal statement, or any time the Vatican disciplines a theologian, it has been the custom of the CTSA to put out a statement on the Vatican's act, and almost always their conclusion will be that the Vatican is wrong. I'm not entering into the merits of these discussions, but that's just the reality. And that tendency to put out statements like that have the effect of essentially dividing the theological community in the United States. So the liberal scholars continue going to the CTSA. The more conservative tend to drift to an organization called the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, which was actually founded back in the 70s in reaction to another statement from the CTSA endorsing same-sex unions. Sort of "never the twain shall meet." There are a few lonely souls that try to make it to both meetings, but most people do not. And so the reality is that for a long time this division, this laceration, if you like, within the discipline of Catholic theology has sort of served as a metaphor for the broader division in the Church.

So with that as context, Finn gave the presidential address which closes the CTSA meeting every year, and essentially he said, we've got to stop putting out these statements. And notice, not because he's saying they're wrong. He wasn't talking about the merits of any particular statement. His point was rather that the cost we have paid in putting out these statements is too high relative to what we have gained. He said, first of all, these statements have become the public face of the CTSA to the broader world. They think all we do is sit around and talk about how we're going to poke a finger in the eye of the Vatican, which is not what they do with their time. Secondly, it has had this device of driving away all the theologians who do not think like us from our meetings. In a Church that is so badly fractured in I would say tribalism, we need more dialogue, and the urgency of the moment therefore, as he put it, is to rebuild the CTSA as a place where theologians of all the different schools, all the different temperaments and outlooks and instincts, come together and do their theology together. And the price of that is not putting out statements, that is, the majority of the CTSA should not use the mechanics of democratic procedures to ram statements down the throats of people who would not have complied with them and who would be alienated by them. And in that sense, I think, Finn's effort was to try to reorient the internal climate of the CTSA away from seeing its role as sort of being a prophetic voice vis-à-vis Church authority; that is, towards seeing the body as such as a kind of arena, a virtual piazza, if you like, in which Catholics of different backgrounds and different outlooks can come together and get to know one another.

The reason I said that this is "potentially transforming" is not only because of the CTSA's history, but because my diagnosis of American Catholicism, to put it in a nutshell, is this: The great tragedy of Catholic history in the United States in the Twentieth Century is that we spent the first half of the century clawing our way out of the ghetto that had been imposed upon us by a hostile Protestant majority, and we've spent the second half of the Twentieth Century reconstructing ghettos of our own choosing, so we've ended this century as badly segregated as we began it—although we're not divided from the Protestants anymore; we're divided from one another. And anyone who knows the Catholic landscape in the United States knows this is true. You have your social justice Catholics, you have your Charismatic Catholics, you have your traditionalist Catholics, you get your peace and justice Catholics, you get your meat and potatoes Catholics, and that diversity in itself, in principle, is a tremendously enriching thing. The problem is that all of these people behave like tribes. They read their own publications, they go to their own meetings, they have their own heroes, and very rarely do they interact with Catholics who don't share that kind of tribal outlook. I think the toxic consequences of that way of organizing life in the Church are before the eyes of us all, the most toxic of which is that so

much of our energy is consumed in these kinds of inner struggles that we have precious little left over for the business of redeeming the world, which, in theory, it's supposed to be more about.

So my view is that what Finn's talking about is of importance not just for that group or for the theological guild, but it's an example of a kind of new way of approaching these questions, which if it catches on, has the potential to sort of lead us out of this street without any exit, lead us out of tribalism towards a new way of interacting. And I frankly think that's a tremendously exciting vision.

Albacete: Alright. I have one more question. This is it. This is the big question. We want the dirt now, the real scoop. What's going on in Rome? One hears that there's an old guard trying to resist any serious changes appealing to the expected brevity of the pontificate. I ask you, how has the Vatican changed with the new pope? A few months ago you wrote that people went to St. Peter's Square in the past to look at John Paul II, but now they go in even greater numbers to listen to Benedict XVI. Can you elaborate on this difference?

Allen: Well, those are a few different questions and I'll try to briefly answer each. First, what has changed in the Vatican under Benedict XVI. My short answer to that question would be—nothing. I think if you were to go talk to the average Vatican official, and I'm not talking about Cardinal so and so, but I'm talking about the people who actually do the work, okay? The desk officers in the Secretary of State, or the monsignors who run the congregations, and so on, and you ask them, "What has changed in the way you do your work from John Paul II to Benedict XVI?" And I do this all the time. They will tell you "nothing" with the slight exception that the pace picked up slightly with the transition because there's a lot of stuff that had been put on hold, but in terms of the procedures and the assumptions and how they organize their days and what their goals are, and so on, I would say that very, very little has happened. And I would analyze that this way:

First of all, speaking about myths that exist in the Church that exist in the popular consciousness, you know, I think there's this notion that the pope somehow sits in front of a computer terminal in the basement of the Apostolic Palace and controls everything that goes on in the Church, so if a Vatican official gives an interview in the afternoon saying something about Iraq, there's an assumption that this was crafted at the papal desk. Not true. One of the first things you learn about the Vatican is that there's the papacy and there's the Vatican, and these are related but very distinct institutions. It's a little bit like the White House and the Civil Service in the American system. There are political appointments that can change a few things, but basically the bureaucracy keeps cranking forward and it takes kind of an earthquake to realign it, and I would say we have not had an earthquake under Benedict XVI, and I think that's a fairly deliberate choice on his part. I think Benedict believes, basically, that he was elected to teach, and that is what he's going to spend his time doing, and he is not particularly interested in dragging people along behind him kicking and screaming. And that approach has its strengths and its weaknesses. It means he does not spend a lot of time inside of ecclesiastical baseball trying to beat people around the head and shoulders. But what it also means is that whatever tone that he's setting, all of these locked concepts that you just ruled out in terms of his Christological cosmology or whatever, it's an open question, the extent of which that is going to be institutionalized in the people who serve, in his collaborate.

Now the business of going to see John Paul and going to hear Benedict... Well, look, this is to some extent one of those classic examples of journalistic contrast... people wanted to hear John Paul as well. John Paul produced a wealth of teaching material over the course of his twenty-six years that in a way we are still digesting. It's not that Pope Benedict is completely maladroit at the level of gesture I want. I mean, right now, today, what I was doing was writing a chapter on Islam in my new book about megatrends in the Church, and I was thinking once again about that marvelous moment in the Blue Mosque in Istanbul where Benedict and the Grand Mufti of Istanbul stood together and shared that moment of silent prayer which was an utterly jaw-dropping moment if you know anything about Ratzinger's attitude toward inter-religious prayer, which I think showed a pope who was beginning to master the kind of symbolic dimension, symbolic register—there's still some ground to cover there, but nevertheless, it's happening.

But, having said that, this contrast nevertheless does open something up to us which is that John Paul I think... a great symphony of ideas between the two men, but I think the basic difference is that John Paul is a dreamer and Benedict is a realist in terms of instinct and personality. John Paul never made a bold plan in his life, and his life experience taught him to expect that he could have a dramatic impact in the here and now. So when he went to Victory Square in Warsaw in 1979, and pointed down and said, "May the Holy Spirit renew the face of this land, this place, this Poland." Obviously he didn't know the chain of events that was going to occur, but he fully expected that he and the Church and his message would set loose a chain reaction of events that would have some utterly unpredictable, but with mammoth and sweeping impact in real time. And he got frustrated when he didn't have that impact. I think he took to his grave the bitter disappointment that he was not able to bring about the reawakening of the Christian roots of Europe that he spent so much time talking about.

The difference is that Ratzinger doesn't have any expectations that he's going to awaken the Christian roots of Europe in his own time. I remember the first time I met him was in 1997 in San Francisco. He was there for a doctrinal consultation and I remember we were at a little reception, so this is off the record, but I asked him, "I want to ask you, Your Eminence, a personal question which is: Setting aside the rights and wrongs, it's a plain fact that the majority of theologians in the United States don't agree with your views, so my question is, is that personally frustrating that you have not been able to convince fellow members of the guild of the positions you take?" You know what his answer was? His answer was, "Well, you know, in the Seventeenth Century, the Church had a problem with Jansenism, and the Vatican had to intervene several times. Now I'm not sure how many Jansenists changed their minds then, but three hundred years later, Jansenism is no longer a living force in the Church. That's the arch of time."

So I think his view is that the providential logic of his election is to try to represent, in a way, the fundamentals of the Christian faith beginning from Christ and working outward to an audience, strictly a western audience, that thinks it understands these fundamentals, but really doesn't, because what they're reacting against is not the paw prints of those of the Christian faith, they're reacting against impressions and stereotypes and the baggage of five hundred years of cultural development. I think he's trying to bring us back to the beginning to work forward, and I think he understands that in real time that is not going to play out in dramatic, front-page-news kinds of moments. If you look at it, the only dramatic, front-page moments of his papacy today have been accidents. Regensburg and the thing in Brazil—both cases where he didn't adequately anticipate how his logic was going to be received by people who don't have licentia in sacred

theology. I don't think he's going for the big splash. I think it is the kind of still, small voice that is the model of his pontificate, and it's going to unfold in patient, careful teaching that is deliberately unsensational and deliberately non-creative in the sense of which those of us in the west think of creative, which means dreaming up something new. When people went to see John Paul, when you were in the presence of John Paul, you always knew something huge could happen. It didn't always happen, but you just knew that he could let loose with an impromptu remark or a gesture or something...By and large, you don't go to Benedict XVI expecting drama, but what you do go is expecting to be edified and challenged and informed by what he has to say, and in that sense he's a little bit more of an insider code, I'd have to say. He's a bit of an enigma to the outside world, and kind of a tough sell. But I think his views over the course of time will be known.

Albacete: Thank you very much.