

Interview with Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia
Boston Globe March 26, 2014

By John Allen

Were you impressed with the Philadelphia delegation?

I have to say it was very impressive, in terms of both its size and the high level of the participants. It certainly indicates that the most important officials in the city and the state are particularly interested in this world meeting. I was equally impressed by the media turnout, because there were four TV stations, two daily papers, and a press agency accompanying the delegation. It underlines the importance of the event, not just for the city of Philadelphia but the whole country.

It's not every day that the governor of a state and the mayor of a major city visit the Vatican a year in advance of an event to show their support, is it?

It's completely extraordinary. I also have to say that I was struck that these are people who come from very different political and cultural traditions, but they're together on the importance of this project. I was also impressed by the participation of a Jewish couple. It all confirms for me how important the theme is of the congress we'll be holding, and at the same time the importance of making sure our discussion of the family gives space to diverse religious and cultural traditions.

I can also say that when the Pope met the delegation this morning, he was very pleased and encouraged by how robust it was.

How likely is it that Pope Francis will be in Philadelphia in September 2015?

If you look at how welcoming he was to the delegation today, it certainly makes one think he'd like to come. Both the governor and the mayor had a long time to talk with him, and the Pope was very warm with them. Given that human warmth, along with the importance of the theme of the family and how focused the Catholic church now is on it, I think it's reasonable to imagine the presence of the Pope in Philadelphia. That said, these trips are never confirmed more than four or five months in advance, and I don't want to speak for the Pope. We have to leave him the freedom to make the decision himself.

If he does come, it would be the first time in his life that Pope Francis has visited the United States. Do you think that might be an extra reason he'd be inclined to do it?

Certainly that's an additional reason to do it, though I believe the fundamental point is how important the theme of the family is to Pope Francis and to the church. I think all these reasons contribute to an environment in which it's OK to hope for a positive decision.

You also know that the Pope has been invited to address a joint session of the American congress. Does that also make the trip more likely?

There's no doubt that it adds to the weight of the moment. I can tell you that Pope is well aware of the attention being given to the possibility of his coming to the World Meeting of Families, not just in the archdiocese in which it's taking place but throughout American society.

The World Meeting of Families will be taking place in Philadelphia just before Pope Francis convenes a Synod of Bishops on the family in Rome. How do you see the connection between the two?

If you look at the vision that the Pope has asked for from the entire Catholic church regarding pastoral concern for marriage and the family, one of its distinctive features is its remarkable openness. Above all, he's calling us to be close to the realities that families are living through today, not just Christian families but everyone. In that sense, the World Meeting of Families can't just be a simple restatement of doctrine. It has to be a sounding board to put us in touch with the realities of family, life and in that sense there's a profound connection with the synod. Actually, I think you could say that the World Meeting of Families is part of the journey for the synod.

Do you expect any concrete contributions to the debates in the synod?

I think the meeting will generate some important suggestions. For one thing, we're planning to publish a catechism on the family for the world meeting, and it should also contribute to the discussions in the synod. In addition, some of the bishops who will be participants in the synod are already part of our planning and discussions.

When talk turns to the family in American politics, people often assume it's all about the press for gay marriage. Are you at all concerned that this event could be misunderstood as a huge anti-gay marriage rally?

I want to do everything possible to avoid falling into that trap, because this isn't an ideological exercise. I hope what we can do is to lift up the hopes and the anguish, the joys and the fears, of real concrete families. There are millions and millions of elderly persons, young adults, children, babies, immigrants, and so on, all around the world, who depend on their families. The family is not an abstract idea. It's something that everyone experiences, and it's obvious that our greatest effort must be to lift up this social institution which, through the centuries and across the different cultures, has been the world's most beautiful and most important source of human solidarity.

To be clear, this is not a political rally. The World Meeting of Families never has been, and it isn't now, a demonstration against someone or something. It's a meeting of thousands of men and women who want to testify to the beauty and the possibilities of the family. It's also a chance to enter into dialogue with all Christian traditions and all religious traditions who share our interest in this theme. In other words, the spirit of this event isn't political, it's eminently pastoral. I hope we can have a frank dialogue with the American media so they see this clearly.

What do you hope will be the most important result from the event?

Obviously, what we're trying to promote is a sort of springtime for the family, a renewal of the

family across the entire world. We want to help families to rediscover their mission and, in so doing, to revitalize the world. When families are strong, they give life in a very concrete way to all of society.

We'd also like to raise the cultural profile of the issues facing the family. Ideally, we can help promote a situation in which the same centrality that Pope Francis has given to the family in church can also be achieved in other institutions, such as politics, the economy, cultural institutions and the legal system.

How's your collaboration with American Catholic officials on the meeting?

I must say there's no doubt that the Archdiocese of Philadelphia is deeply committed to the success of the meeting, with the strong support of the other dioceses in the United States. I'll be at the June meeting of the U.S. bishops to discuss the event. My impression is that all the institutional forces are working very well together.

During his comments at the Vatican press conference on Tuesday, Archbishop Charles Chaput said the event is especially important for Philadelphia because of the way it's been negatively affected by the sexual abuse scandals. Are you aware of how much impact those scandals have had in Philadelphia and in other parts of the United States?

We've certainly spoken about it. The World Meeting of Families can be very sensitive to that situation, because in a way the scandals have caused a weakening of the sense of family within the Christian community. It's important that we foster the ideas of co-responsibility, mutual support, reciprocal respect and honesty as part of that family spirit in the church, which I hope in some way can help heal the wounds of the past.

If Pope Francis does indeed come to the United States next year, do you believe he understands that he'd have to address the sexual abuse scandals?

I believe so, and I think the sensitivity of the Pope on this issue is very clear. The recent creation of a new Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors is already a sign of that concern. If he comes to America, I'm sure the Pope wouldn't fail to take account of how important all this is.