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Council of Cardinals; pope interviews; Assisi; Francis the mystic; and war on Christians

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 4, 2013 All Things Catholic

I've been covering the Vatican for almost 20 years, and aside from the two conclaves during that span, I'd be hard-pressed to recall many weeks with more breaking news than what we experienced the last seven days.

After giving a talk for the Cushwa Center at the University of Notre Dame on Monday night, I've been in Rome following events. Here's a tick-tock of what we've seen:

- On Monday, Pope Francis presided over a consistory of cardinals that set April 27, Divine Mercy Sunday, as the date for the canonizations of Popes John Paul II and John XXIII. The sainthood double-play is expected to bring more people to Rome than for any event since the funeral Mass of John Paul II in 2005.
- In that same consistory, Francis took the temperature of the cardinals about the idea of setting up national and regional tribunals around the world to handle sex abuse cases. It's an idea that's been around a while, reflecting the fact that many dioceses, especially in the developing world, don't have the resources or expertise to process these cases effectively. If Francis follows through, it would mark his first concrete act of reform on the sex abuse front.
- Also on Monday, Francis issued a chirograph, or legal document, formally establishing his new Council of Cardinals as a permanent advisory body and giving himself latitude to add members. In effect, it was a way of underlining how much importance the pope attaches to the group, informally dubbed the "G-8."
- On Tuesday, yet another stunning Q&A with the pope [1] hit the newsstands, this time in the form of a long interview by a left-leaning Italian journalist and nonbeliever named Eugenio Scalfari. In it, Francis blasted the trappings of a royal court in the Vatican as "leprosy," conceded that its appetite for temporal power remains strong, complained that too many churchmen are "Vatican-centric," called proselytism "solemn nonsense," and vowed to do everything in his power to change the system. He also revealed a bit of mystical subtext to his papacy. (More on that below.)
- Also on Tuesday, the Vatican bank -- formally the Institute for the Works of Religion -- issued the first annual report [2] in its 125-year history to be certified by an independent auditor, an act obviously intended to project a new climate of transparency. News also broke that day that the bank is closing down approximately 900 accounts, including some held by foreign embassies, for incomplete documentation or suspicious movement of funds.
- Still on Tuesday, the much-anticipated first meeting of the G-8 began, running through Thursday afternoon. Francis took part in virtually all of the sessions, which began in the library of the papal apartment but then shifted to the Casa Santa Marta.
- On Wednesday, Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi told reporters the G-8 had taken up the relationship of the Vatican's various departments with the pope, the role of the Secretariat of State, and reform in the Synod of Bishops, as well as pastoral matters such as the care of married couples. He said the cardinals also pondered the vision of the church expressed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).
- On Thursday, Francis held an audience for participants [3] in a conference on the 50th anniversary of John XXIII's peace encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, openly asking if the words "justice" and "solidarity" are just "in our dictionary" or if "all of us work so they become reality." The pope also ad-libbed an

expression of solidarity with shipwreck victims in Lampedusa, the southern Mediterranean point of arrival for poor immigrants he visited July 8, calling the latest tragedy that claimed more than 100 lives "shameful."

- Also Thursday, Italian papers carried summaries of an interrogation by Italian investigators of Msgr. Nunzio Scarano, the former Vatican accountant arrested in June for alleged involvement in a plot to smuggle $26 million in cash into Italy at the behest of a family of shipping magnates. Scarano had worked at the Administration of the Patrimony of the Holy See (APSA), the department that manages the Vatican's physical properties and investments, and reportedly told investigators [4] that APSA officials routinely take gifts from banks looking to do business with the Vatican, including cruises, stays in five-star hotels, even personal massages. Scarano charged that APSA operates as a "parallel bank," allowing lay VIPs to put money in its portfolio and even promising to out-perform the Vatican bank. He also said competitive bidding procedures for repairs to APSA properties are rigged, with officials taking a share of the profits as a kickback.
- Still on Thursday, Lombardi held another briefing on the G-8 meeting. Among other points, he said the cardinals and pope are not interested simply in making "amendments" to *Pastor Bonus*, John Paul II's 1988 constitution on the Roman Curia, but in "important changes" that would likely result in a totally new document. Those changes, Lombardi said, will move in the direction of emphasizing the role of the Vatican as "service to the local churches," not as "centralization" of power. Lombardi also said the cardinals devoted considerable attention to the laity, including the role of the laity inside the Vatican. In response to a reporter's question, he said the sex abuse issue did not come up during the G-8 meeting.
- Around 8 p.m. Rome time on Thursday evening, Lombardi issued a communique via email announcing that the next meeting of the G-8 will be Dec. 3-5, with another to follow in early February. He'd already said the cardinals will continue their work between meetings, collecting input, evaluating ideas and passing on suggestions to the pope.
- Today, Francis traveled to Assisi, an outing that was equal parts pilgrimage and statement about his vision of the church. Pointedly, his first two stops were encounters with the sick and the poor. At a hospital for sick and disabled children, he ignored his prepared text to talk about how Christians need to hear the wounded. Later, he blasted what he called "pastry shop Christianity," saying there's no Christianity without the Cross. He also took a shot at the media, saying newspapers had been "full of fantasies" about the trip, suggesting he was coming to "strip" the church -- renouncing honorific titles, selling off properties, etc. His real interest, he said, was to call the church to a "stripping" of the "cancer of worldliness." During his Mass, he insisted that the peace of Francis is not "saccharine" nor "a kind of pantheistic harmony with forces of the cosmos," but the peace of a personal relationship with Christ. I said on CNN this morning that we're used to thinking of the Vatican as the premier symbol of the papacy, but for Francis, his real spiritual headquarters is 115 miles to the north in Assisi.

If reading that rundown was tiring, imagine what it was like covering it all in real time. Thank God my *NCR* colleague Joshua J. McElwee was also here, because no one person could have kept up with it all. You can find his superb reports on the *NCR* website [5].

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Now for two takeaways from the week, beginning with the Scalfari interview.

There continues to be debate over how reliable the text of the conversation [1] presented in *La Repubblica* is at the level of detail. While Lombardi took pains to stress that the "sense" of the text is "trustworthy," saying that if Francis felt his thought had been "gravely misrepresented" he would have said so, he stopped short in reply to a question I asked during a briefing of affirming that the pope actually pronounced, word-for-word, all the lines attributed to him.

Veteran Italian Vatican-watcher Andrea Tornielli, who has a personal relationship with Francis predating his election, wrote Wednesday that he has doubts about some lines attributed to the pope in the Scalfari interview, including that Francis asked for a delay before accepting the papacy in order to go into a small room to collect himself. As Tornielli correctly notes, there are no small rooms immediately adjacent to the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica as described by Scalfari, and in any event, cardinals who were there say the pope accepted his election immediately.

The idea that some lines as published by *La Repubblica* may have been after-the-fact reconstructions as opposed to direct quotes has driven some people to distraction, especially given that the interview was later published by *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, and on the Vatican website. If we're not sure these are actually the literal words of the pope, many have asked, then what are they doing in official Vatican organs?

Perhaps the most insightful take on all this came from Lombardi himself, who said we're seeing the emergence of a whole new genre of papal speech -- informal, spontaneous and sometimes entrusted to others in terms of its final articulation. A new genre, Lombardi suggested, needs a "new hermeneutic," one in which we don't attach value so much to individual words as to the overall sense.

"This isn't Denzinger," he said, referring to the famous German collection of official church teaching, "and it's not canon law."

"What the pope is doing is giving pastoral reflections that haven't been reviewed beforehand word-for-word by 20 theologians in order to be precise about everything," Lombardi said. "It has to be distinguished from an encyclical, for instance, or a post-synodal apostolic exhortation, which are magisterial documents."

Implicit in that reaction is that the pope is probably going to continue to shoot from the hip, and sometimes he'll allow voices outside the narrow circle of authorized spokespersons to tell the world what he said, trusting them to get the gist of it and perhaps not sweating the details. Trying to put every line or every anecdote under a microscope in those circumstances may be a waste of time.

If the pope wants to express himself formally and with precision, Lombardi implied, he has other ways of doing it.

Second, here's a quick thought about the charges leveled by Scarano against APSA in his interrogation with Italian authorities.

First of all, let's be clear that an accused party has every reason in the world to impugn someone else in the hope of mitigating their own culpability. "It wasn't just me!" is a time-honored defense for all sorts of people caught with their fingers in the cookie jar.

That said, Scarano is nonetheless a veteran APSA official, and his accusations will have to be taken seriously. If even some of them prove to have merit, it may upend the way most observers have been thinking up to this point about financial reform in the Vatican.

Heretofore, the working assumption had been the toughest nut to crack would be the Vatican bank, largely because it's always been a premier magnet for scandal and conspiracy theories. The truth, however, is that today, the bank may be the Vatican financial institution furthest down the path of reform.

That's in part because the threat of closure put on the table by Francis and other members of his Council of Cardinals has accelerated the pace of change and in part because of the vision of the bank's new president, German businessman Ernst von Freyberg. (Von Freyberg told me recently it's his ambition to put gossipy

newspaper reports out of business by making it so easy to get information directly from him that journalists don't have to rely on whispers in Roman bars.)

As a result, it could be that cleaning up the bank turns out to be the easy part of Francis' glasnost while other Vatican financial departments that have not yet been subjected to the same kind of scrutiny -- APSA, for instance, or the government of the Vatican City State -- are the tougher cases.

In turn, that suggests that of the two other commissions created so far by Francis -- one to study the Vatican bank, the other focused on the "administrative and economic structures of the Holy See" -- the latter may turn out to have the more complicated, and more consequential, assignment.

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I confess I was personally irritated by the Scalfari interview, not because I questioned its basic accuracy, but because it robbed me of a scoop.

I was planning to write this week about a tidbit concerning Pope Francis I had picked up from a cardinal who had a private meeting with him recently, but before I could roll it out, Scalfari beat me to it. Basically, the "scoop" concerns the mystical subtext to the boldness and freewheeling style we've seen from Francis, which stands in stark contrast to the reputation he had in Argentina.

In the relevant portion of the interview, Scalfari asks Francis if he's ever had a mystical experience. Here is the response as presented by *La Repubblica*, concerning the moments immediately after he was elected to the papacy:

"My head was completely empty and I was seized by a great anxiety. To make it go way and relax I closed my eyes and made every thought disappear, even the thought of refusing to accept the position, as the liturgical procedure allows. I closed my eyes and I no longer had any anxiety or emotion."

That experience, Francis suggests, gave him the courage to accept the job and to forge ahead.

It's an important insight because it helps explain something that otherwise seems inexplicable: How to account for the transformation that's come over Jorge Mario Bergoglio since he became Pope Francis?

Consider that during his entire 15 years as the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Bergoglio gave a grand total of five interviews. In the seven months he's been pope, he's already done three, and they've all been humdingers.

Journalists who covered Bergoglio in Argentina report that he shunned the spotlight, and on those rare occasions when he did have to appear in public, he often came off as formal and, some would say, a bit boring. As pope, he's become a rock star. As archbishop and as president of the bishops' conference in Argentina, Bergoglio was careful and measured in his public declarations, while as pope he's letting it all hang out.

Back in April, I interviewed his sister [6], Maria Elena Bergoglio, and even she told me that something was different about her brother since he took over the church's top job.

Recently, I spoke to one of the cardinals who elected Francis (not an American, by the way), who had been received by the pope in a private audience. The cardinal told me he had said point-blank to Francis, "You're not the same guy I knew in Argentina."

According to this cardinal, the pope's reply was more or less the following: "When I was elected, a great sense of inner peace and freedom came over me, and it's never left me."

In other words, Francis had a sort of mystical experience upon his election to the papacy that's apparently freed him up to be far more spontaneous, candid and bold than at any previous point in his career.

One should never doubt the mystical imprint upon the contours of a papacy.

John Paul II, for instance, was sometimes accused of being overly determined -- stubborn, some would say -- once he'd made up his mind about something. Yet this was a pope profoundly convinced that on May 13, 1981, the Virgin Mary had changed the flight path of a bullet to preserve him in office. (The assassination attempt fell on the feast of Our Lady of Fatima.) Given that belief, John Paul undoubtedly felt a certitude about the path he was walking that went beyond merely human logic.

In a similar fashion, Francis may now feel a comfort about the new direction he's setting that cuts much deeper than PR calculations or "best practices" in corporate management. That, at least, would seem the face-value implication of what he told both my cardinal friend and Scalfari.

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Tuesday brought the formal launch of my new book, *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution [7]*, from Image Books. In essence, it's my attempt to answer a question Pope Francis posed during his Sept. 25 General Audience: "When I hear that so many Christians in the world are persecuted, am I indifferent, or is it as if a member of my own family is suffering?"

Readers can find a cover story I wrote for the U.K.-based *Spectator* based on the book here [8].

Meanwhile, here's a sample chapter of the book [9].

Whatever the merits of the book, the story it tries to tell is hugely important. We're witnessing the rise of an entire new generation of Christian martyrs in the early 21st century, and their plight represents not only the most dramatic Christian narrative of our time, but also the most untold Christian story.

Thursday brought yet another reminder of those realities, in this case in the northeastern Indian state of Orissa, site of the most violent anti-Christian pogrom in recent history back in 2008. A series of riots back then ended with as many as 500 Christians killed, many hacked to death by machete-wielding Hindu radicals; thousands more were injured and at least 50,000 left homeless. Many Christians fled to hastily prepared displacement camps, where some languished for two years or more.

Those riots began when a local Hindu holy man was killed, which angry mobs blamed on Christians, even though Maoist guerillas twice took credit for the assassination.

On Thursday, seven local Christian men were convicted of the killing by an Orissa court in what many observers regard as a sham trial. Sajan George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians, called the sentence "a mockery, the sad demonstration of how the Indian judicial system works," while the local Catholic bishop vowed to help the men appeal.

While local authorities, who are connected to the political wing of the Hindu nationalist movement, moved heaven and earth to convict these seven Christians, to date, only a handful have been convicted for the carnage directed at Christians while scores have been acquitted.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but that's what a real "war on religion" looks like. One aim of the book is to reframe the conversation over religious freedom among Western Christians so we don't allow our metaphorical battles at home to obscure the literal, and often lethal, war on Christians being waged in other parts of the world.

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