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Three conclusions from 'Bones of St. Paul' affair

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Ironically, one can learn a great deal from Pope Benedict XVI's surprise announcement last Sunday that carbon-14 tests appear to confirm that St. Paul's remains lie under the basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls — except, perhaps, who is actually buried in Paul's tomb.

During a Vatican news conference this morning, the scientist in charge of those tests, carried out in May 2007, said they prove that tiny micro-fragments of bone extracted from a sarcophagus under the basilica's main altar date to the first or second century. In scientific terms, the result "doesn't make certain, but also doesn't exclude," that the remains are those of St. Paul, said Professor Ulderico Santamaria, director of a diagnostic laboratory for the Vatican Museums.

Though that obviously doesn't amount to absolute certainty, it's nonetheless suggestive. Meanwhile, there are three other conclusions from the "Bones of St. Paul" affair which rest on firm ground.

Conclusion one: When he wants to, Benedict can be a showman

Pope Benedict XVI isn't generally known for an actor's command of timing; that was more often the forte of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II. Yet this time around, Benedict's sense of drama seemed impressive.

During the press conference, Italian Cardinal Andrea Cordero Lanza di Montezemelo, who finished his four-year tenure as Archpriest of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls today, said he asked Benedict XVI's permission to test the remains in the sarcophagus four years ago. Cordero said the results were

actually ready to go more than a year ago.

Cordero said his original proposal was for the pope to announce the findings last June, at the start of a 'Year of St. Paul' decreed by Benedict XVI to mark the 2,000th anniversary of his birth. Instead, Cordero said, Benedict replied that he wanted to wait until year's end, on the theory that such an announcement might keep interest in St. Paul alive beyond the close of the official Vatican year dedicated to his memory.

Of course, Benedict could have delegated the announcement to someone else, or made it during a period when some other big story was breaking. By doing it himself, however, and during a lull prior to the release of his encyclical on the economy and his meeting with President Barack Obama, he played his card to maximum effect.

When Benedict made the announcement Sunday night, he generated news around the world — for once, on his own terms, and on a topic of his own choosing.

Conclusion two: The Vatican's PR strategy is still a mystery

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While the announcement itself may have been a coup, the Vatican's follow-up left many people scratching their heads. A moment's thought before Sunday night would have suggested that since it was coming as a surprise, the announcement would stir a fair bit of curiosity — and in some quarters, probably a smidgen of skepticism.

Since that reaction was as predictable as the rising of the sun, and since the Vatican has been sitting on these test results for a year, several questions might well be asked:

Why wasn't a Vatican spokesperson standing by at the basilica on Sunday night with a packet collecting all the results, and explaining who carried them out and how they were done? (That material could also have been distributed electronically at the same time the Vatican sent out the text of Benedict's homily)

Why did the Vatican wait all the way from Sunday night to Friday morning to organize a briefing with the people involved in the tests?

Why has the Vatican declined to make any images available, saying instead that they must first be published in a scientific volume?

In the absence of those steps, confusion and conflicting reports about the findings mushroomed throughout the past week.

For example, the pope said on Sunday that the carbon-14 tests were carried out by 'experts unaware of where the material came from,' but other reports suggested the tests were conducted by the Vatican officials. (Santamaria clarified this morning that while the tests were done under Vatican Museum auspices, the technicians didn't necessarily know what they were trying to date.) Different answers also seemed to be floated as to whether the sarcophagus had actually been 'opened' during the tests. (Cordero said this morning it wasn't 'opened' in the conventional sense of the term; Santamaria said that a tiny hole was created to permit the insertion of a fiber-optic camera, a procedure he compared to microsurgery.)

Others wondered why a DNA test had not been carried out on the remains. Speculation began to circulate that perhaps a DNA test had been conducted, and the Vatican was hiding something. (Cordero said this morning that the tiny fragments recovered were not large enough to permit a DNA test, but that he would not rule out such a procedure in the future.)

Of course, an evil PR genius might wonder if the Vatican allowed the confusion to mutate on purpose, in order to keep the story alive. That scenario, however, would require a degree of stratagem? not to mention cynicism? which probably strains credulity.

Conclusion three: Once bitten, the Vatican's not twice shy on carbon 14

For some, the big surprise may be that Benedict XVI permitted a carbon 14 examination of the remains in the sarcophagus at all, given what happened the last time a major Catholic relic was subjected to that procedure.

In 1988, the world-famous Shroud of Turin, regarded by devotees as the burial cloth of Christ, was subjected to carbon-14 tests which appeared to suggest it was a medieval fraud. (Specifically, the test purported to show that it dated from 1300 A.D.) Those results have been vigorously contested, and a steady stream of pilgrims still seems convinced the shroud is genuine. Nonetheless, the whole affair left a bad taste in many Catholic mouths.

Given that, why would Benedict XVI agree to open the carbon-14 can of worms once again?

One answer came from Cordero this morning, who said that he had suggested doing the tests as a way of revitalizing the basilica. The thought was that if testing the remains would generate a buzz around the tomb, it might increase foot traffic and general interest. (One can imagine a Discovery Channel special, for example, somewhere down the line.)

In a similar vein, perhaps Benedict XVI recalled the controversy surrounding Pope Paul VI's 1968 announcement that the bones of St. Peter had been located in excavations under the surface of St. Peter's Basilica. To this day, debate continues about how secure that identification really is, but the overall effect has been to increase awareness that the basilica is built on the spot where tradition believes Peter was buried, and to stimulate reflection on the figure of Peter.

Perhaps Benedict's calculation was that however the tests might turn out, they would help keep Paul in the spotlight.

A new cardinal-to-be

One final note apropos of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. The Vatican announced today that Benedict XVI has accepted Cordero's resignation as archpriest, and named Archbishop Francesco Monterisi as his successor. In effect, that makes Monterisi a good bet to become a cardinal the next time Benedict chooses to hold a consistory, the event in which new cardinals are created.

Assuming things play out that way, it will keep alive a bit of Vatican wisdom which holds that anyone named to the job of secretary, meaning the number two official, in the powerful Congregation for Bishops will eventually become a cardinal. Monterisi has held that position since 1998.

Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia is one example of this custom, as he served as secretary of the Congregation for Bishops from 1989 to 1994.

In that light, it's worth noting that Monterisi's successor will be Portuguese Archbishop Manuel Monteiro de Castro, who had previously been serving as the papal nuncio, or ambassador, to Spain. If the past is prologue, Monteiro too should one day be in line to enter the College of Cardinals.

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