

Vatican tightens papal security ... a little

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 5, 2010 NCR Today

An extra two yards of space has been added to the central corridor in St. Peter's Basilica when the pope processes down the aisle during major liturgical celebrations, in order to give security personnel more room to maneuver should someone breach the barriers as happened Christmas Eve.

Meanwhile, rumors are swirling in Rome that the woman who lunged for the pope on Christmas eve, Susanna Maiolo, a 25-year-old Swiss-Italian national, may soon get a tête-à-tête with the pontiff, perhaps at the end of a Wednesday General Audience. On Dec. 31, Maiolo was visited by Monsignor Georg Gänswein, the pope's private secretary, and the head of Vatican security in the psychiatric hospital where she was admitted after the Christmas Eve incident.

Italian news reports said that Gänswein relayed the pope's forgiveness, and Vatican spokespersons said that Maiolo's eventual release is probable.

In past incidents when people have breached papal security without malicious intent, they've often later been granted a few moments with the pope. While that's usually seen as a laudable humanitarian gesture, critics have argued that it may actually encourage such incidents.

According to a report in the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale* by veteran Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli, the Christmas Eve incident prompted a meeting in the Vatican to discuss papal security. Tornielli wrote that two schools of thought surfaced — one desiring a larger and more visible security presence around the pope, another wanting a "more discrete" response that would simply put more space between the pope and would-be assailants.

Judging from the results in St. Peter's on Jan. 1, the Feast of the Mother of God and the church's World Day of Peace, the latter school prevailed. There was little increase in the number of security personnel, but the central corridor in the basilica was notably wider.

Instead of simply turning to his side, Pope Benedict had to take a few steps in either direction in order to shake hands, kiss babies, or deliver blessings, as popes often do during their entrances and exits in the basilica.

Ideally, that should give security officials more time to respond in case of a threat — without bowling over either the pope or other celebrants, as happened Christmas Eve when French Cardinal Roger Etchegaray suffered injuries to his leg and hip.

Of course, the new measures subtly adopted by the Vatican inside St. Peter's Basilica don't address the question of the pope's exposure elsewhere, such as liturgical celebrations or other public events during his travels.