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'The Simpsons' and the Vatican press

by John L. Allen Jr.



The Simpson family is pictured in "The Simpsons Movie." (CNS/FOX)

Analysis

Oddball combinations never fail to amuse. On their own, neither poodles nor break dancing constitute a novelty, but find a break-dancing poodle and YouTube awaits. In the same spirit, a recent paean to "The Simpsons" in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, sparked chuckles around the world.

After all, Homer Simpson is the postmodern everyman who once mused, "What's that religion with all the well-meaning rules that don't work out in real life? ... You know, Christianity." For the Vatican's in-house organ to pay tribute on the show's 20th anniversary is, therefore, noteworthy.

In truth, the Dec. 23 piece by Italian essayist Luca M. Possati probably says more about *L'Osservatore Romano* than it does about television's longest-running animated program.

Pope Paul VI once said that nothing human is alien to the church, so the Vatican's interest in "The Simpsons" should be no surprise. As Possati noted, it's a global phenomenon "from the United States to Europe, from Russia to China, all the way to the Middle East."

The same logic has led *L'Osservatore Romano* to comment on other pop culture phenomena, from the "Harry Potter" movies to the recent sci-fi blockbuster "Avatar." The review described "Avatar" as largely

harmless, if also banal, though it did sound a note of caution about a tendency to worship nature.

(?The Simpsons? is a staple of Italian TV too, even if some distinctively American references have to be tweaked to make them accessible to the kind of people who staff *L'Osservatore Romano*. For example, the show?s ancient plutocrat, Mr. Burns, once complained that he?s ?as impotent as a Nevada boxing commissioner.? In Italian, that became ?as impotent as an old Christian Democrat.? The Italian version of Ned Flanders? famous tagline, ?Okely dokely,? comes out as ?*Certo certosino!*?)

The striking thing in the case of ?The Simpsons? is not that the Vatican paper should weigh in, but that it did so favorably. Possati suggested that without the ?tender and irreverent, scandalous and ironic, deranged and profound? program, with its ?philosophical and at times even theological? touches, ?today many would not know how to laugh.?

?Rigid censors turn off their TVs,? Possati wrote, ?but more serious analysts praise the realism and intelligence of the scripts, even if they also object -- justifiably -- to language that?s sometimes crude and the violence of certain episodes.?

In terms of a ?Simpsons theology,? Possati wrote that ?the relationship between man and God? is ?one of the most important, and most serious? themes in the show. He argued that ?The Simpsons? provides an intriguing mirror of the ?religious and spiritual confusion of our times,? referring to an episode where Homer climbs a celestial staircase for a tête-à-tête with God, who?s seated behind a desk with a sign reading: ?I believe in Me.?

All this may not add much to our understanding of ?The Simpsons,? since fans were already aware that religion is a major theme. On the other hand, the piece does confirm something important about *L'Osservatore Romano* under its editor Gian Maria Vian. In the two-and-a-half years since Vian took over, the paper has become far more interesting and provocative -- even, by Vatican standards, ?hip.? (That?s true even if the cultural moment when ?The Simpsons? was actually hip has probably come and gone.)

As a result, *L'Osservatore Romano* today is more fun to read, but less useful as a guide to Vatican policy.

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Vian is a former history professor at Rome?s secular La Sapienza University who also once worked as a Vatican reporter for *L'Avvenire*, the newspaper of the Italian bishops? conference. He was appointed to run *L'Osservatore Romano* in October 2007 by the Vatican?s secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, a longtime family friend. (Vian?s brother Paolo works in the Vatican Secret Archives.)

L'Osservatore Romano was founded in 1861, during the twilight of the Papal States, when the Vatican sought new ways to make itself heard. For most of its history, the paper has had a cautious, institutional profile, often jokingly compared to Pravda in the old Soviet Union.

Vian has said that Pope Benedict XVI and Bertone charged him with making *L'Osservatore Romano* ?more present in cultural debates,? and he?s done that in spades. He introduced color to the front page, but that?s only the most visible shift. He?s brought an aggressive journalistic mindset, commissioning essays, profiles and interviews that could find space in most secular outlets -- including, Vian has said, at Benedict?s direct request, more contributions from women.

Vian has also not been afraid to speak his mind, most notably telling another Italian journalist last summer that Barack Obama "is not a pro-abortion president." That claim sparked a backlash from pro-life Catholics in the United States, as well as a "What the hell is going on?" reaction among Vatican-watchers accustomed to thinking that every word in *L'Osservatore Romano* flows from the pope's lips.

While there is a loose coordination between Vian and the Secretariat of State on foreign policy, on most matters the editor calls his own shots -- and increasingly, Vian's shots are more journalistic in flavor and less institutional. In consequence, the right way to approach *L'Osservatore Romano* these days would seem to be as a guide to what literate, moderate-to-conservative Catholic insiders in Italy are thinking (or, in the case of "The Simpsons," their guilty pleasures).

That's certainly interesting, and not without implications for handicapping Vatican affairs. Clearly, however, there's no one-for-one correspondence between what's in *L'Osservatore Romano* on Monday and what the pope will be doing or saying on Tuesday.

In other words, don't expect a decree of heroic virtue from Benedict about Homer Simpson quite yet, or for that matter an anathema for "Avatar." But if it ever does happen, you'll probably read about in *L'Osservatore Romano* first.

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