

Kasper blasts media coverage of Vatican rumors

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 4, 2010 NCR Today

I'm on my way to Rome, and to get up to speed I'm reading the Italian press. As usual, the papers feature the latest rumors about behind-the-scenes power struggles in the Vatican, this time resurrecting the now-infamous Boffo case which was the great Roman soap opera of last summer.

In a nutshell, Dino Boffo was the editor of the newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference and a well-known figure in Italian Catholicism. He was forced to resign in August after a secular newspaper, edited by a political ally of conservative Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, published rumors suggesting that Boffo had been involved in a homosexual affair. The primary document at the base of those rumors has since been discredited, but that hasn't stopped enterprising reporters from trying to figure out who leaked it to Boffo's enemies. The latest reconstruction goes like this: Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, gave the green light; Gian Maria Vian, editor of the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, put things into motion; and the head of Vatican security, Domenico Giani, was the guy who actually passed on the document.

Generally speaking, I don't bother recycling stuff like this, because it's almost always based on anonymous sources or none at all, and more often than not the story falls apart as soon as it's in print. In this case, the editor of the paper which published the original report has denied that either Bertone or Vian was the source (while insisting that it wasn't the guy who runs the coffee bar downstairs either, but someone trustworthy in the Catholic world.) I mention it only because it has occasioned an unusually stinging denial from a senior Vatican source: Cardinal Walter Kasper, who'll be 77 in a month, and who since 2001 has been the Vatican's top official for ecumenism and relations with Jews.

Kasper, it should be said, is generally seen as perhaps the most moderate cardinal at the senior levels of the Vatican, and someone not generally given to pious defensiveness about any criticism of the church. His comments, therefore, suggest a general frustration inside the Vatican about certain currents in press coverage—a frustration that, among other things, may help explain why the Vatican isn't always as media-friendly as outside observers might expect or hope.

The following is an *NCR* translation of an interview with Kasper which appeared in the Feb. 4 edition of *La Stampa*, a major Italian daily.

Were the documents against Boffo furnished by the Vatican?

Absolutely not. There were official denials months ago. To insist upon unfounded rumors is not to tell the story of the church as it really is. They suggest a political perspective, they hypothesize conflicts, and they deny any sense of harmony. It's a perspective completely different from reality, because inside the Vatican no one thinks the documents against Dino Boffo have an internal origin, or that any kind of responsibility can be connected to *L'Osservatore Romano* or even the Secretariat of State. It's a reconstruction that is not only untrue, but it doesn't make any sense.

Why?

There's just no reason for that kind of maneuver. When the Vatican's Secretariat of State wants to intervene in order to change a situation, to change course or to move somebody out of a job, they have the capacity to do so directly, in the full light of day. Not only would such a maneuver never happen, but there's no need for it. For that reason, nobody takes these rumors about an internal origin for the Boffo case seriously. It's unthinkable that Bertone or Vian had anything to do with it. What's circulating in the mass media are complete inventions. I never believed them, because they're neither logical nor worthy of attention.

Where does all this come from?

If the church is presented only in political terms, it's due to a growing anti-clerical and anti-ecclesiastical tendency. There's a hostility towards the church that drives people to seek and inflame conflicts and divisions. When they don't exist, they're invented. That's what interests the enemies and critics of the church. But the church has to expect these attacks, which Jesus predicted. He too was attacked, and the church has the same fate. The message of the gospels is different from the world, and for that reason people look for points of conflict in order to damage the church.

Vian above all is mentioned ?

Without reason. From the time he became the editor, *L'Osservatore* is much improved, much more readable, interesting, and relevant, exactly as Benedict XVI wanted. Before it was too Italian, now it has an international cultural slant, it's more attentive to ecumenism and to inter-religious dialogue, and it even gives space to non-Catholic authors. It's proof of a living church that bothers some people for its presence in public life, but the attacks from its enemies are a recognition of its vitality.

How will the Boffo case end up?

Stories which are inflated or invented don't last. I've experienced that, both in the diocese and in the Curia. There are different visions in the Vatican, but not ruptures or power struggles. Indeed, total uniformity would be death. Reading about plots worthy of the Borgia court, or fantastic scenarios like those of Dan Brown, makes me think that the Gospel will be contested until the end of the world. That was the case with Christ, and it will always be the same for the church, which may not please everybody, but we must have the courage to give witness. On Tuesday for the feast of the Presentation of Christ, he was defined as a sign of contradiction. That's true also for the church.

Is it just an image problem?

For the mass media, harmony is boring. Among the Christian churches, the Catholic church is the most unified. Those Protestant churches which are ultra-liberal and lack a clear profile don't have strength anymore, while the Catholic church is considered powerful and therefore its presence bothers people, its weight in secularized society. But in the long run, these attacks become a boomerang for those who try to discredit [the church] by depicting it as a center of intrigues.

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