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Vatican woes confuse ordinary Catholics

by John L. Allen Jr.

Analysis

Behind the scenes in Rome these days, word is that the Vatican is in something of a mess. Talk of chronic managerial, personnel and public relations woes under Pope Benedict XVI is in the air -- and that's what the pope's best friends are saying, never mind his critics.

While it's a fact of life that Roman vicissitudes often have little impact in the pews, these meltdowns nonetheless risk bringing on a creeping demoralization, especially among those Catholics around the world forced to pick up the pieces.

Most recently, the Vatican was engulfed by a mini-drama related to reports in the Italian media that senior aides to the pope had engaged in a Machiavellian scheme to remove the editor of the Italian bishops' newspaper, *L'Avvenire*, by leaking fake documents suggesting the editor harassed a woman in order to carry on a homosexual affair with her fiancé.

After 18 days of silence, the Vatican issued a denial, prompting one Italian paper to run the sardonic subhead: "They deny everything, but no one believes it." (In truth, people in the know found the claims incredible, if only because a Vatican cardinal who really wants to be the editor of a church publication has less elaborate ways of going about it. Just ask Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese, the former editor of *America*, forced out under Vatican pressure in 2005.)

The latest soap opera was confined to Italy, but it came atop a litany of other crises with global resonance:

- Benedict's September 2006 lecture in Regensburg, Germany, which set off a firestorm of Muslim protest by appearing to link Muhammad with violence, even though the bulk of the text was

actually more critical of the West for overreliance on reason;

- Revival of the old Latin Mass in 2007, including a Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews, edited to address Jewish concerns only after it became a cause célèbre;
- Lifting of the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops, including one who has minimized the Holocaust, in January 2009, with caveats about requiring the bishops to accept the Second Vatican Council and to renounce anti-Semitism coming only after a global controversy erupted;
- Creation of new structures to welcome former Anglicans, apparently prepared and unveiled without much consultation either with Anglican leaders or Catholicism's own ecumenical experts, and without any clear sense of what the actual demand for these structures might be.

Even those inclined to believe there's a positive way to construe these developments would generally concede that the Vatican, especially in the early stages, didn't handle things well. Fairly or not, much of the blame is assigned to Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's secretary of state and the man this teaching pope trusts to make the trains run on time. As one senior American prelate put it recently, "Bertone jumped into the deep end of the pool and found out he can't swim."

Under other circumstances, some bishops and pastors might rue a gap between Rome and the rank and file. These days they may actually be grateful, since it tends to absorb some of the shock from these upheavals.

Yet life in the trenches can't be completely insulated from Vatican developments, because when a crisis ripples out from Rome, sooner or later Catholics everywhere can be caught in the undertow.

When things go bad in Rome, for example, bishops, prominent priests and nuns, and members of what *Commonweal* editor Paul Baumann calls the "Catholic commentariat" are pressed into duty with the media, going on TV and writing op-ed pieces trying to make sense of things. Bishops and other church officials field worried phone calls -- from ecumenical or interfaith partners, from liturgists, from theologians, from anyone whose ox seems to have been gored. Parish priests are compelled to wonder if they should deal with the crisis in their homilies, knowing that it's in the air and on people's minds.

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Ordinary Catholics, too, may find themselves around the water cooler at work or on the field where their kids play soccer, pressed by friends, neighbors and colleagues asking the obvious question: "What's going on with your church?" The fact that Catholics often don't understand it themselves only compounds the frustration.

All of that, of course, comes atop the normal challenges of being Catholic in a post-Christian, secular world.

Msgr. Ronald Knox, a convert from Anglicanism in the first half of the 20th century, famously quipped that anyone wishing to sail calmly upon the barque of Peter should steer clear of the engine room. That's undeniably good advice -- but it may not stop a growing number of Catholics from hoping for a steadier hand at the rudder.

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