

Why Rome scorns resignations, and a great week for wonks

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 13, 2010 All Things Catholic

It may be a measure of how somnambulant Rome becomes during the *ferragosto* vacation period that the big Vatican story this week was actually something that didn't happen. It turns out that two Irish bishops implicated in that country's sexual abuse crisis, Dublin auxiliaries Eamonn Walsh and Raymond Field, won't be resigning after all, because Pope Benedict XVI wants them to stay on.

Two other Irish bishops cited in the November 2009 "Murphy Report" for failing to adequately respond to abuse in the Dublin archdiocese had already stepped down, and both Walsh and Field submitted their resignations last December. News broke this week, however, that Benedict XVI has rejected the resignations, so the two bishops will be reassigned to new duties instead.

Unsurprisingly, that decision has not gone down well with victims' groups -- SNAP said the pope is "rubbing more salt into already deep and still fresh wounds" -- or with the Irish media. The *Irish Times* editorialized that the decision sends "the most contradictory of messages" and undercuts Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, who has led the charge for reform.

I don't have any insight on why Walsh and Field in particular were spared, but I can offer four broad reasons why the Vatican is always reluctant to see a bishop resign under fire, whether in Ireland or anyplace else.

First, the Vatican doesn't want to feed impressions that public opinion and media hostility can bring down a bishop. Rome wants bishops to be willing to say and do unpopular things, on matters ranging from abortion to immigrant rights, and it would obviously be a deterrent if the bishop has to worry that Rome might capitulate to pressure campaigns seeking to run him out of town on a rail.

Such blowback, of course, is a special risk in the early 21st century, when the Internet and 24-hour cable news channels have created a whole new industry of outrage generation.

Second, allowing a bishop to resign, even if it's entirely merited, can create an avalanche which buries other bishops who don't share the same level of responsibility. If that happens, a good chunk of a country's episcopacy could be wiped out -- further destabilizing an already volatile situation, not to mention creating pressure to find replacements quickly and perhaps without sufficient thought.

Third, the Vatican also tends not to remove problem bishops because, in the institutional culture of the church, retirement has traditionally been seen as a reward for a job well done. A retired bishop has all the privileges of rank and few of the burdens, so the tendency is not to let a man walk away until he has cleared his desk.

The case of former Cardinal Michele Giordano of Naples offers an illustration. Giordano, who finally exited the scene in 2006 after turning 75, twice faced criminal charges for shady accounting, and once was actually convicted and sentenced to house arrest. Both times, rumors abounded that Giordano would be removed, and both times the Vatican instead let him stew in his own juices. Officials later said, on background, that they never had any intention of letting Giordano off the hook. That's how they held him accountable: Not by firing him, but

by forcing him to stay on the job and clean up his own mess.

Fourth, and perhaps most fundamentally, the Vatican does not like the idea of a bishop resigning for poor performance because, in their view, it's bad theology. As they see it, a bishop isn't a corporate CEO or a football coach, who should be sacked when profits sag or the team goes on a losing streak. The episcopacy isn't a job but a sacramental bond akin to marriage, with the bishop as the father of the diocesan family. In the early centuries of the church, it was considered almost heretical for a bishop to move from one diocese to another on precisely this basis.

That's the core ecclesiological reason Rome favors a bishop staying put in times of crisis: Like a father, or so the traditional reasoning goes, a bishop shouldn't abandon his family if he's let them down and they're feeling angry and betrayed. Instead, he should "man up" and make things right.

Of course, none of this means the bias against removing bishops is always correct; even if one accepts the sacramental view, there are times when an abusive father needs to be removed from a household. It does, however, suggest that the Vatican sometimes may have reasons beyond denial or arrogance for being reluctant to act.

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The past week has been a great one for Catholic policy wonks, with three new empirical studies out offering important data relative to various aspects of the church's life and mission. We begin with a stunning new x-ray of religion in Italy.

By way of preface, I'll concede there's no reason in principle why the vicissitudes of the church in Italy should count for more than, say, the Democratic Republic of the Congo or the Philippines, or for that matter the United States -- all countries whose Catholic populations exceed that of *il bel paese*. Yet Italy nonetheless looms disproportionately large, for at least two reasons. First is the historic role of the church and the papacy in Italy, so virtually anything that happens, or fails to happen, is viewed as a referendum on the church's influence. Second, Italy is like a second home for a broad swath of the church's policy-makers, intellectuals and activists.

As a result, when the Italian church sneezes, the Catholic world tends to catch cold.

In that light, Catholics everywhere might want to stock up on chicken soup and Robitussin before picking up the current issue of *Il Regno*, a popular Italian Catholic magazine published by the Dehnonian Fathers, which features the results of a massive survey of Italian religious behavior and belief by sociologist Paolo Segatti of the University of Milan.

Segatti's sobering conclusion is that within a generation, Catholics could be a minority in Italy. The study carries an intentionally provocative title -- "Religion in Italy: From Catholic to Generically Christian."

To be sure, the results aren't all bad news for the church:

- 81.3 percent of Italians self-identify as Catholic (officially speaking, 96 percent were baptized as Catholics).
- Almost 28 percent of Italian Catholics go to Mass on at least a weekly basis, a rate comparable to the United States and extraordinarily high by European standards.
- Almost 60 percent of Italians say they feel personally offended when they hear someone speak badly of either the church or the pope.
- Almost half of Italians say it's important to be Catholic in order to be a "true Italian."

- More than two-thirds of Italians, 67.8 percent, say they trust the church, a significantly higher result than either the national parliament or political parties.

These seem basically impressive results for a nation at the heart of contemporary Western Europe, where secularism is part of the basic cultural package, like TNT and ESPN come with basic cable. One can understand why some experts have talked about secularization actually being "arrested" or even "reversed" in Italy.

Yet drilling down, the most striking aspect of Segatti's data is the vast generational divide between those born after 1981 -- meaning anyone under 30 -- and older Italians, especially those 65 and above:

- While 27 percent of Italians overall go to Mass at least once a week, it's 44 percent for the 65+ cohort and just 13 percent for the under-30 crowd.
- While 72 percent of Italians say they "always" believe in God, it's 80 percent of those above 65 and barely above half of those under 30.
- Only 14 percent of Italians under 30 say they "often" think of themselves as Catholics, and only 28 percent think there's any connection between being Catholic and being Italian.
- While 77 percent of Italians over 65 say they trust the church, that figure falls to less than half, 44 percent, for those under 30.

Looking at the beliefs and practices of the youngest Italians, Segatti writes, "One has the sense of observing a different world," a world which "offers a glimpse of a future in which believers are a minority."

There's a further set of disquieting results for Catholic leaders, which is the weak role of the church in public debate.

Offered a long list of hot-button social questions -- including end-of-life care, abortion, homosexuality, unemployment, immigration, and the personal moral conduct of politicians -- majorities of Italians in virtually every case said it should not be part of the church's mission to speak out on the issue. The lone exception was unemployment, where 51 percent said the church should make its position known -- perhaps reflecting the tradition of Catholic social teaching, as well as the important role of organized labor in Italy.

Segatti draws the conclusion: "The religiosity of Italians has taken on characteristics which force ecclesiastical institutions, if they want to play a role in the public sphere, to compete with secular forces. More often than may appear, they succumb to those secular forces in shaping the opinions of their own faithful on public questions."

The future of religion in Italy, Segatti concludes, will be "more diversified and evanescent," as "a country once Catholic becomes generically Christian."

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Speaking of surveys which ought to give church leaders pause, there was also an Associated Press-Univision poll released this week which found that younger Hispanics in the United States, and those who speak more English than Spanish, are less likely to identify with the Catholic church.

Overall, 62 percent of Hispanics in America identify themselves as Catholic. As in Italy, however, there's a clear generational divide: Only 55 percent aged 18 to 29 self-identify as Catholics, compared with 80 percent of those 65 and above.

The poll also found that religious belief and practice tends to be keener among Latino/a Protestants, especially those who belong to an Evangelical or Pentecostal church. Such Hispanics are twice as likely to attend religious

services on a weekly basis, they're more likely to see the Bible as the Word of God, and more likely to hold traditional views on issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion.

At least three questions suggest themselves:

- Is there something about Catholicism in America that offers Hispanics less insulation from the pressures of secular culture than Evangelical and Pentecostal churches?
- Is there something about the transition from Spanish to English that's associated with a decline in Catholic faith and practice? (For instance, is the sort of Catholicism that's developed in Anglo-Saxon culture, with its emphasis on individualism, congregationalism, etc., sometimes uncongenial for Hispanics?)
- What programs of outreach or evangelization among younger Latino/a Catholics seem most promising?

For obvious reasons, all of this ought to be of live concern to pastoral leaders in American Catholicism.

A recent Pew Forum study of the American religious landscape projected that in 2030, the Catholic church in the United States will reach a demographic milestone: For the first time, whites will not be a statistical majority of the Catholic population. They'll still be a plurality, at 48 percent, but Hispanics will represent 41 percent. Around mid-century, Hispanics will likely become the Catholic majority.

Given that demographic reality -- which Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum, calls the "browning" of American Catholicism -- the fate of the faith among younger Hispanics will have a great deal to say about the American Catholic future.

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Finally, there was also a study out this week which offers some unalloyed good news for the Catholic church.

Thomson Reuters, which is a secular, for-profit source of business and professional data, released a study of 255 health systems in the United States, grouping them into four categories: Catholic, other church-owned, secular non-profit, and investor-owned for-profit. The bottom line is that Catholic health systems had the highest scores for overall quality, as well as for the quality of services offered to the communities they serve.

Factors taken into consideration included:

- Overall mortality rates
- Complication rates
- Patient safety index
- 30-day risk-adjusted mortality rate for heart attack, heart failure, and pneumonia
- 30-day risk-adjusted readmission rate for heart attack, heart failure, and pneumonia
- Average length of stay
- Patient ratings of overall hospital performance

Catholic systems, along with church-owned systems generally, significantly outperformed both for-profit providers and secular non-profit health systems.

"Our data suggest that the leadership teams (boards, executives, and physician and nursing leaders) of health systems owned by churches may be the most active in aligning quality goals and monitoring achievement across the system," the study concluded.

The last year or so, to be honest, has been a turbulent period for Catholic health care in America. A bruising political battle over health care reform opened a rift with the U.S. bishops which still isn't completely closed, and there are hard questions about the economic viability of Catholic hospitals and systems in some parts of the country. At the moment, the proposed sale of Caritas Christi Health Care in Boston to a venture capital group, which has aroused indignation in some Catholic circles, illustrates the point.

Especially in that context, it's consoling to see a clear public acknowledgment, and from an objective secular source, of the extraordinary quality of Catholic health care in America. *Complimenti!*

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