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Most under-reported Vatican stories of 2010

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All Things Catholic

If it's true that the only thing worse than negative publicity is no publicity, then 2010 was a banner year for the Vatican. It opened with a sexual abuse crisis in Ireland that would sweep across Europe and put the personal record of Benedict XVI under a spotlight, and it ended with frenzy over the pope's comments on condoms and various Vatican efforts to explain what Benedict did, and didn't, mean.

The Religion Newswriters Association, made up of beat reporters in the United States, ranked the sexual abuse crisis the third-biggest religion story of the year, behind the New York mosque controversy and faith-based relief efforts in Haiti. That's quite something, given that the crisis of 2010 wasn't even primarily an American story.

To be fair, the year's news wasn't all bad for the Holy See. Arguably the highlight of 2010 from the pope's point of view came in September, when his improbably triumphant trip to the United Kingdom also drew wide international interest.

As is always the case when a few massive narratives dominate coverage, other storylines tend to slip through the cracks. Herewith, my annual run-down of the "Top Five Under-Reported Vatican Stories of the Year" — five stories with important implications for the Vatican and the way it thinks about the world, which didn't get the traction they deserve.

5. The Boffo Case

What Italians call the *giallo*, literally meaning "yellow" but used to refer to a mystery, surrounding Italian Catholic journalist Dino Boffo first erupted in 2009. Facing accusations that he had harassed a woman because he wanted to pursue a gay affair with her lover, Boffo resigned as editor of *L'Avvenire*, the newspaper of the Italian bishops, in September 2009. Boffo denied the charges, but said he stepped down

to spare the bishops the embarrassment.

In mid-January 2010, the case reignited after revelations that a purported police document about Boffo was a fake. Speculation ensued in the Italian press about who was behind it, which congealed into the following hypothesis: The Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, wanted to get rid of Boffo because he was associated with Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the former president of the Italian bishops and Bertone's rival for preeminence in Italy. Bertone supposedly enlisted the editor of the Vatican newspaper and the head of the Vatican gendarmes in the plot. A fake document was cooked up and passed to allies in the secular press, who proceeded to smear Boffo and ensure his demise.

In reality, that reconstruction never passed the "smell test" to begin with, the Secretary of State has far less complicated ways of sacking the editor of *L'Avvenire* but it captivated the country for a full 18 days before the Vatican made any comment. Under the rubric of silence signifies consent, many Italians concluded that it must all be true. When the Vatican spokesperson was finally authorized to reject the accusations, one Italian paper carried the following banner headline, which seemed to capture the moment: "The Vatican Denies Everything, No One Believes It."

Aside from exercising a kind of macabre fascination, like train wrecks and NASCAR pile-ups, the Boffo case confirmed that the Vatican remains remarkably slow and ambivalent with regard to the dynamics of public opinion in the 21st century. Especially among Italians, the fact that the Vatican let the Boffo case spin so far out of control also cemented impressions of a crisis of governance under Bertone. Remedying that crisis may figure prominently on the "to-do" list of many cardinals the next time they gather to elect a pope.

As a footnote, Boffo has been more or less rehabilitated. In October, he was named the director of TV2000, the official television network of the Italian bishops.

4. Scandals at Propaganda Fide and the Vatican Bank

In 2010, two venerable Vatican institutions, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (the department for missionary activity still known by its old name, Propaganda Fide) and the Institute for the Works of Religion (popularly called the Vatican Bank), faced accusations of financial shenanigans.

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For centuries, Propaganda Fide has been a financial empire all to itself, owning scads of prime real estate and managing large bank accounts in order to fund overseas missions. The cardinal-prefect is informally dubbed the "Red Pope," a reference to the power and influence those resources generate. (The Italian newspaper *Libero* has estimated the market value of the congregation's real estate holdings, which reportedly include 761 buildings, 445 sets of grounds, and 2,325 apartments, at roughly \$1.7 billion.) Many observers have long believed that the wealth of Propaganda Fide, coupled with its near-total autonomy, made it ripe for a financial scandal, and 2010 turned out to be the year those chickens came home to roost.

In June, Italian prosecutors announced that Italian Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe of Naples, who headed Propaganda Fide from 2001 to 2006, is the target of an anti-corruption probe. The theory is that Sepe gave Italian politicians sweetheart deals on apartments at the same time that millions of Euros in state funds were allocated for remodeling projects at Propaganda Fide, including its headquarters in Rome's Piazza di Spagna. In effect, the suggestion is that Sepe bribed public officials to fund work that in some instances

was never completed.

As of this writing, an investigation by Italian prosecutors is on-going. Sepe has declared his innocence, saying, "I acted solely for the good of the church."

At the Vatican Bank, meanwhile, some \$30 million in assets was seized by civil authorities in September for violations of European anti-money laundering laws. Although bank officials have described the case as a "misunderstanding", recently released court documents show prosecutors suspect that clergy with accounts at the bank may be involved in laundering money for corrupt businessmen and even the Italian mob. One brief filed by prosecutors in November states that while the bank has expressed a "generic will" to conform to international standards, "there is no sign that the institutions of the Catholic church are moving in that direction."

In an effort to combat those impressions, the Vatican yesterday announced the creation of a new financial watchdog, the "Authority for Financial Information," to supervise all transactions, including those of the Vatican Bank. Benedict XVI issued a *motu proprio*, or legal document, creating the new authority, which is designed to put the Vatican in compliance with international standards against money-laundering, financing terrorism, insider trading and market abuse. The new authority reportedly will be headed by Cardinal Attilio Nicora, a financial expert who negotiated a 1984 revision to the concordat between the Vatican and Italy.

The lay president of the Vatican Bank, Italian economist Ettore Gotti Tedeschi, has repeatedly expressed his commitment to transparency; indeed, most Vatican-watchers saw his appointment in 2009 as a signal that Benedict XVI wanted a "glasnost" in Vatican finances.

Both the Propaganda Fide and the Vatican Bank scandals illustrate two broad points.

First, the era of broad civil deference to ecclesiastical authority is over. These days, police and prosecutors aren't reluctant at all to target the church, a point also brought home in June by police raids against the Catholic church in Belgium as part of a sex abuse probe, which included drilling holes in the tombs of two former archbishops of Brussels.

Second, the Vatican finds itself between a rock and a hard place when it comes to cooperation with secular authorities. On the one hand, it faces a 21st century world in which the Vatican is expected to be accountable before the law like any other institution. On the other, it has an internal culture shaped by centuries of battles to resist civil interference, and an evangelical ethos resistant to being co-opted by secularism. Some old Vatican hands are skeptical of Gotti Tedeschi's "glasnost" precisely on the grounds that it risks surrendering the independence for which popes in previous centuries struggled so mightily. That rock-and-hard-place dynamic would seem to augur more church/state battles to come.

Finally, the eruption of these financial scandals is also likely to increase pressure for good governance in the church, not only in the Vatican but in dioceses, parishes, and other Catholic institutions around the world. In the States, groups such as the Leadership Roundtable on Church Management have a new card to play in their conversations with bishops and pastors: "Do you want to be the next Sepe?"

3. Europe and the Crucifix

Speaking of church/state battles, in November the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the display of crucifixes in Italian public schools is a violation of "confessional neutrality" and ordered the Italian government to pay a complaining parent roughly \$6,500 in damages. If upheld on appeal, the ruling could establish a broad European standard against the display of religious (mostly, to be honest, Christian)

symbols in public spaces.

The decision galvanized wide opposition in Italy, where the crucifix is generally seen as a symbol of national identity. It also fueled resentment about faceless European bureaucrats imposing their will on member states. Italy filed an appeal, which has been joined by Armenia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, Malta, Monaco, Romania, Russia and San Marino. A final decision is expected in early 2011, though observers caution against expecting a dramatic reversal, given that many of the same judges from the first round also sit on the court of appeals.

Seen through Vatican eyes, the crucifix case has cemented two broad impressions.

First, it's strengthened a conviction that the European Union is in the grip of a runaway secularism hostile to the Catholic church. Among other things, that's accelerated the demise of antique anti-Americanism in the Vatican; today, most senior personnel in the Vatican, including Pope Benedict XVI himself, look longingly across the water at what they regard as a more religion-friendly culture in the United States.

Second, it's contributed to the transition from "inter-religious" to "inter-cultural" dialogue as the primary model for engaging other religions. The idea is that while different religions cannot come to theological agreement, they face many of the same social, cultural and political pressures, especially vis-à-vis secular efforts to drive religion from the public square. On that front, it's telling that the lawyer representing the Vatican before the European Court of Human Rights is actually Jewish: Joseph Weiler, who was born in South Africa and who now teaches at the NYU School of Law.

2. The Synod for the Middle East

Granted, synods of bishops are rarely the stuff of high drama. More often than not, they're reminiscent of what Oscar Wilde once said about the problem with Socialism: "It takes up too many evenings."

In some ways, the Oct. 1-24 Synod for the Middle East was a case in point. The assembly produced 44 propositions, a 5,000-word final message, and a tidal wave of speeches, without any appreciable impact on the situation on the ground. Christians were an endangered species in the Middle East before the bishops gathered in Rome, and they remain so afterwards.

In fact, the only development with any bite as a news story was actually a distraction. In a concluding news conference, a Greek Melkite archbishop from Massachusetts told reporters that Christ had "nullified" the notion of Israel as a "promised land" for Jews, triggering accusations of both theological and political anti-Semitism. While those comments made for good news copy, they hardly represented the dominant thrust of discussion.

As a result, the synod was largely a missed opportunity to tell the most dramatic Christian story anywhere in the world. In the Middle East, Christians have shrunk from 20 percent of the population a century ago to maybe five percent today, yet they're desperately trying to punch above their weight. Their great dream is to catalyze a democratic revolution across the region — pressing Israel to better integrate its Arab minority, and Islamic societies to make their peace with modernity. It's a vision that unites Catholics with an ecumenical smorgasbord of other Christians, not to mention like-minded Muslims and Jews.

If that vision fails, not only will Christianity face extinction in the land of its birth, but the most natural human bridge between the West and the Muslim world will collapse.

The synod actually generated some interesting ideas toward that great dream. They included concrete ways of overcoming the traditional turf wars among the seven Catholic rites of the Middle East

(Armenian, Chaldean, Coptic, Latin, Maronite, Melkite and Syrian), empowering the local patriarchs, and strengthening ties between local Christians and their diaspora communities abroad. The bishops of the Middle East, typically known for a soft approach to Islam, also flirted with a more realistic line, pushing beyond the "tea and cookies" stage of dialogue into blunt talk about pluralism, reciprocity and the perils of Islamization.

Bottom line: If there's any Christian community on the planet that merits the concern of Catholics in the West, especially in America given the influence of the United States in the region, it's in the Middle East. An opportunity to build that awareness was all but missed this year, as the synod flew below radar until the very end, and then drew notice only for a sideshow.

1. Christianophobia

Strictly speaking, "Christianophobia," referring to anti-Christian intolerance and persecution around the world, isn't really a Vatican story. After all, the 108 acres of the Vatican city-state are probably the safest bit of real estate for Christians on the planet. Yet what many experts regard as a rising global tide of anti-Christian animus carries enormous, and often under-appreciated, consequences for the Vatican's priorities and the way it thinks about the world.

The term "Christophobia" was coined by Weiler to refer to the growing marginalization of Christians in secular Europe. Modified into "Christianophobia," it entered the European lexicon in 2004 when Italian politician Rocco Buttiglione was blackballed as European Commissioner of Justice over his orthodox Catholic views on abortion and homosexuality. The United Nations Human Rights Commission now recognizes "anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and Christianophobia" as forms of religious intolerance.

"Christianophobia" has since become a broader concept, referring to anti-Christian oppression wherever it occurs, including its violent forms. And around the world, it occurs with stunning frequency.

Aid to the Church in Need, a German-based Catholic aid agency, produces a widely trusted annual report on global threats to religious freedom. It estimates that somewhere between 75 percent and 85 percent of all acts of religious persecution are directed against Christians. In a report to the European Parliament last month, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life said that while Muslims and Jews face significant persecution, "Christians faced some sort of harassment in two-thirds of all countries," or 133 states.

Those statistics are fleshed out by headlines almost every day.

This Christmas season alone, scores of Catholic Masses were cancelled in Iraq due to threats from extremist groups. Since the first Gulf War in 1991, Iraq has lost two-thirds of what was once among the largest Christian populations in the Middle East. In China, a new crackdown on the church is in full swing, as the government has orchestrated elections for a rump bishops' conference and an assembly of Catholics calculated to preserve state control. Some clergy were herded into those elections virtually at gunpoint.

In Vietnam, a Catholic bishop was banned from celebrating Christmas Mass in the country's mountain region, reportedly because of his success in converting the Montagnards, a cluster of ethnic groups often stigmatized and seen as potential threats by other Vietnamese. In the Philippines, Muslim extremists attacked a Catholic chapel on the island of Jolo on Christmas Day. It was merely the latest assault on Jolo, where a bomb exploded inside the local cathedral in July 2009, killing six and wounding forty. In Nigeria, fighting between Christians and Muslims in the northern city of Jos over the Christmas period has reportedly left at least 80 people dead.

Christianophobia is on the rise for a whole cocktail of reasons. Part of it is simple math: There are 2.3 billion Christians in the world, the largest following of any religion, so in terms of raw numbers there are simply more Christians to oppress. That's especially true as Christianity's center of gravity shifts to the developing world, where democracy and the rule of law are sometimes conspicuous by their absence.

Because of the historical association between Christianity and the West, Christians are often convenient targets for individuals and groups expressing anti-Western rage. In some cases, too, the logic is exquisitely local. In India, a disproportionate share of Christian converts come from the "untouchable" Dalit community, so it's often difficult to disentangle specifically Christian persecution from older caste prejudice. (A similar point could be made about the Montagnards in Vietnam).

A spike in anti-Christian backlash shapes Vatican attitudes in three ways.

First, it eats up an increasing share of time and attention. To explain why the Vatican isn't in a full, upright and locked position on the sex abuse crisis, the priest shortage, the health care debate in the States, or whatever the issue *du jour* is, part of the logic is straight out of Maslow: When there's a perceived threat to survival, it's tough to move on to higher-order aims.

Second, it's become a prism through which Vatican personnel see everything else. For instance, if you want to know why Pope Benedict XVI has not imposed a uniform global policy of cooperation with civil authorities on sex abuse cases, it's partly because such a requirement would be a death sentence in parts of the world where police and prosecutors are quite openly out to get the church.

Third, Christianophobia is a primary reason that reciprocity and religious freedom have claimed pride of place among the Vatican's geopolitical priorities. In recent years, diplomats accredited to the Holy See say their opposite numbers in the Vatican seem focused like a laser beam on religious freedom, sometimes leading them to slow down on other fronts, such as anti-poverty efforts, conflict resolution, etc. That's been a source of concern in diplomatic circles, and it's sometimes perceived as part of the crisis of governance under Bertone. Yet it's also related to the point made above: when survival is perceived to be on the line, at least in some parts of the world, it tends to blot other priorities out of the sky.

While individual anti-Christian incidents often attracted wide coverage in 2010, both the scope of the phenomenon and its impact on Vatican psychology were often left out of the picture.

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