

Four titles from a bumper crop of Italian books

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 20, 2011 All Things Catholic

On a per capita basis, Italy probably churns out more books on the Catholic church each year than anyplace else on earth. Given the boost created by the May 1 beatification of Pope John Paul II, this spring has been an especially busy period for the Italian market, generating several titles that will likely make their way into translations and shape Catholic conversation around the world.

This week, I'll offer brief sketches of four such titles to emerge from the recent bumper crop.

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First up is Andrea Riccardi's *Giovanni Paolo II: La Biografia* (?John Paul II: The Biography?), published by Edizioni San Paolo. By now there's a vast John Paul II literature, but this biography -- more than 600 pages long, abundantly documented, and written by someone who enjoyed insider's access throughout the papacy -- joins the elite group of works that really matter in terms of shaping John Paul's legacy.

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Though it's a bit facile to put things this way, one could say that just as George Weigel's *Witness to Hope* has become the defining presentation of John Paul II for North Atlantic conservatives, Riccardi's biography will likely become the key point of reference for the European center-left.

To be clear, that's more a judgment about the likely reception of these books, not so much the intentions of their authors. Both Weigel and Riccardi are serious intellectuals, both have produced works that merit careful consideration regardless of someone's ideological alignment, and their accounts actually converge far more often than they clash.

That said, there's no doubt that Riccardi looks at John Paul II through a different set of glasses.

An accomplished historian, Riccardi is best known as the founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, one of the 'new movements' in the Catholic Church. It was born amid the European ferment of 1968, among young Italian progressives who wanted to change the world and yet stay Catholic. In the decades since, Sant'Egidio has

become known for its ecumenical and inter-faith outreach, anti-death penalty activism, advocacy on behalf of immigrants and the poor, as well as peace-making and conflict resolution. Among its emblematic accomplishments, Sant'Egidio helped negotiate an end to Mozambique's long-running civil war in 1992.

Riccardi devotes an early chapter to whether John Paul II was a "progressive" or a "conservative," and concludes that neither term fits. He quotes Jan Grootaers, a well-known church historian, that in the period after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) Karol Wojtyla was part of the "center" associated with Pope Paul VI, aligned with neither the "progressives" nor the "conservatives."

Riccardi insists that John Paul remained fundamentally a centrist throughout his papacy.

"In Wojtyla, despite the brutal experiences of the war and of communism, there was none of the pessimism about modernity which was the usual story of Catholic thought flowing from the culture of restoration," he writes. "His respect for democracy and his opposition to authoritarian regimes of every type are also noteworthy, as well as his insistence upon the value of conscience."

"This was not a conservative pope," Riccardi writes, "and much less a traditionalist."

Riccardi nominates John Paul II as "the pope of Catholic complexity," meaning a leader who defied all attempts to reduce Catholicism, or for that matter his own papacy, to an ideological position.

In the run-up to the beatification, the current president of Sant'Egidio, Italian layman Marco Impagliazzo, defined John Paul as "the pope of globalization," meaning a pope who embraced the non-Western world and prepared Catholicism to make its way in a global village. It's no surprise, therefore, that Riccardi's chapter on John Paul as a global leader -- someone who saw past the divisions of the Cold War, and who, through his travels and his advocacy, embraced the rising cultures of the global South -- is a pivot point of the biography.

While conceding John Paul's lifelong aversion to Marxism, Riccardi stresses the pope's equal-and-opposite skepticism about "savage capitalism." Through repeated calls for greater North/South solidarity, Riccardi argues, John Paul II embodied a "third position" beyond communism and capitalism, one which sought to integrate economic liberty and free markets with the value of solidarity and a strong role for public authorities.

Though some analysts took John Paul's last social encyclical, *Centesimus annus* in 1991, as a sort of post-Berlin Wall endorsement of capitalism, Riccardi sees it differently.

"In reality, the pope wanted to keep his distance from capitalism, but in a world which, by then, was completely capitalist," he writes.

Naturally, Riccardi also underlines John Paul's commitment to peace-making, to multilateralism and empowerment of developing states, and to harmony among religions. He points especially to the 1986 summit of religious leaders in Assisi to pray for peace, which, Riccardi says, reflected John Paul's "belief that the Catholic church has a special mission for promoting co-existence among different worlds."

John Paul II, Riccardi says, was animated by a deep conviction that religions are protagonists of history, "sometimes with a subterranean force, other times as manifest subjects" of historical change. That influence could be spent for good or ill -- religions can be resources for peace, or agents of division. As a result, Riccardi observes, John Paul felt it was a matter of "healthy realism" to try to bring them together.

John Paul, according to Riccardi, pressed Catholicism towards a new "apostolate of peace."

"The traditional impartiality of the popes with regard to countries at war was transformed by John Paul II into a

passion for intervention in favor of peace, which sometimes seemed to go well beyond the limits of traditional prudence," Riccardi writes.

John Paul II, according to Riccardi, saw no conflict between positioning Catholicism as an agent of dialogue and co-existence, and insisting on clarity about Catholic identity and a renewed missionary spirit in the church. Indeed, Riccardi argues, John Paul II correctly intuited that in a fragmented, disoriented post-modern world, only those actors clear about who they are would be able to chart an effective course for the future.

In an aspect of the book likely to be frustrating for American audiences, Riccardi does not spend much time on the sexual abuse crisis. He notes that John Paul may have been skeptical at the outset given his experience under communist regimes, when false charges of misconduct were often lodged against priests in order to limit their moral authority. Yet beginning in 2001, Riccardi says, John Paul began a process of reform which saw Rome take on a greater share of responsibility for disciplining abuser priests, and which has continued under Benedict XVI.

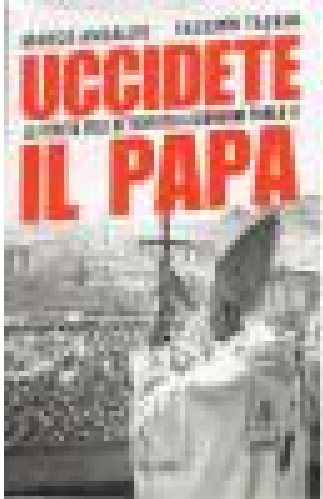
As a rule, Riccardi says, John Paul II was not much interested in routine ecclesiastical administration: "In his mode of governing, he tended more to stimulate the new and the extraordinary, rather than to control or direct the ordinary."

In the end, Riccardi says, John Paul II will be remembered as a man who changed the world.

"He never resigned himself before history, and never gave up hope of changing it and overcoming it," Riccardi said.

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In the media alchemy that made John Paul II a global icon, May 13, 1981, stands as a crossroads moment. The assassination attempt on that day (which happened to be the feast day of Our Lady of Fatima), followed by John Paul's extraordinary willingness to allow himself to be seen and heard in a weakened state during his recovery, as well as his messages of forgiveness to Turkish gunman Mehmet Ali A?ca, all established the pope as an extraordinary public figure. That reputation was further strengthened in December 1983, when John Paul visited Ali A?ca in Rome's Rebibbia prison to personally forgive him.



A bit like the Kennedy assassination, the attempt on John Paul's life is one of the most studied crimes of the 20th century, and yet thirty years later there's still no consensus about what really happened (for example, how many bullets were actually fired that day, or by how many gunmen), or who ultimately was behind it.

Part of the problem, of course, is that Ali A?ca himself has given such wildly differing versions of events over the years -- according to Italian judge Antonio Marini, Ali A?ca has offered a staggering 107 separate

explanations for why he shot the pope, and who else may have been involved. (In arguably his most outlandish claim to date, last November Ali A?ca said that the late Italian Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, John Paul II's first Secretary of State, ordered the hit.)

Italian journalist Marco Ansaldo, and Turkish colleague Yasemin Ta?kin, try to lay the doubts to rest in *Uccidete il papa: La vera pista dell'attentato a Giovanni Paolo II* (?Kill the Pope: The Real Key to the Attempt on John Paul II?), published by Rizzoli.

Ansaldo and Ta?kin quickly review, and dismiss, various theories floated over the years: that the Italian mafia was behind the attack, or the Polish Communists, or a global network of Islamic radicals, or even the CIA or the Vatican itself. They spend more time debunking the so-called ?Bulgarian connection,? because it has become the most popular explanation. It holds that agents of the Bulgarian secret police put Ali A?ca up to the attack on John Paul, acting on instructions from the KGB.

Ansaldo and Ta?kin reject the Bulgarian/KGB hypothesis, in part because, for them, it just doesn't pass the smell test. No secret service, they argue, would have put such a sensitive plot in the hands of an internationally known terrorist such as Ali A?ca (already sought for the murder of a left-wing Turkish journalist in 1979), not to mention a guy known to be completely unstable. Moreover, no secret service would simply have left Ali A?ca to fend for himself after the shots were fired -- they would either have rescued him or killed him, Ansaldo and Ta?kin argue, not left him to twist in the wind.

Instead, Ansaldo and Ta?kin suggest, the attack on John Paul II was ?a plan born in Turkey and developed in Turkey.? By that, they mean it took shape inside the ?Gray Wolves? -- the ultra-nationalist terrorist band with mafia connections to which Ali A?ca belonged. In the early 1980s, they argue, the Gray Wolves had aspirations of going big-time by taking down an internationally famous target, and John Paul II fit the bill. (In 1980, a military regime seized power in Turkey. Prior to the coup, the military had been friendly with the Gray Wolves, but afterwards they cracked down. According to Ansaldo and Ta?kin, the primary motive for the attack on John Paul was thus a desire on the part of the Gray Wolves to prove that they still mattered.)

To this day, Ansaldo and Ta?kin report, the Gray Wolves are the only ones who still surround Ali A?ca and support him. Ali A?ca was released from prison last year and is now living in Istanbul, and if you want to make an appointment to see him, according to Ansaldo and Ta?kin, you have to go through the old Gray Wolves network.

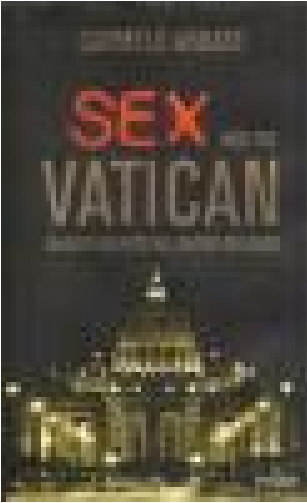
One interesting nugget from the book: Believe it or not, there's a potentially vital piece of evidence which has been on full public display for 30 years, but which has never been examined scientifically. It's a bullet that ended up on the platform of the Popemobile, and which John Paul II later placed in the crown of a statue of the Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal, to thank her for what the pope regarded as her life-saving intervention. Ansaldo and Ta?kin report that the bullet has never been made available to investigators to run ballistics tests, which could prove conclusively that it didn't come from Ali A?ca's Browning 9 millimeter pistol, and hence that a second gunman fired on the pope.

The fact that the Vatican has never turned that bullet over, they suggest, is likely related to John Paul's ?sovereign indifference? to the question of who was involved in the plot. Italian magistrates quoted by Ansaldo and Ta?kin say that John Paul never asked to be apprised of the progress of the various inquests, and on the rare occasions when someone would try to fill him in, he seemed only vaguely interested.

Why? The consensus view is that John Paul II believed the assassination attempt was part of a much larger cosmic drama, centering on the Fatima devotion and especially its famous ?Third Secret.? Given that conviction, the question of which earthly powers might have been involved seemed, to him, very much a secondary matter.

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I've written before that a taxonomy of sub-genres of Vatican literature these days would have to include the "gay priest exposé," based both on the rapidly growing number of such works and their proven capacity to titillate.



The most recent entry is *Sex and the Vatican: Viaggio segreto nel regno dei casti* ("Sex and the Vatican: A Secret Journey in the Kingdom of the Chaste?"), published by Edizioni Piemme. PR materials for the book promise lurid accounts of "priests of every nationality, who divide their time between the Via della Conciliazione [where the main Vatican offices are located] and Rome's nighttime party scene."

The author is Carmelo Abbate, and the book is an expanded version of an exposé on the double lives of priests Abbate published last year in the Italian newsmagazine *Panorama*. The book expands on the *Panorama* material, weaving in stories of straight priests who have relationships with women, including some who have allegedly had children and others who have helped their girlfriends have abortions. The priests involved typically are presented anonymously, using pseudonyms.

(Even taking these accounts at face value, most of the priests seem to have no direct connection to the Vatican. They're either international priests studying in Rome or living in a religious house in the city, or Italian priests serving in Roman parishes. The "and the Vatican" part of the title, therefore, is more about geography -- all this unfolding in the Vatican's backyard -- than it is about the people involved.)

The book is organized into 44 chapters, most of which involve first-person accounts from priests and their lovers, whether gay or straight. It's fairly light on analysis, though the final chapter does include an interview with Richard Sipe, a former Benedictine priest in the United States, who has written extensively on what he sees as a dysfunctional clerical culture fueling various forms of sexual subterfuge and misconduct.

To the extent there's a thesis in the book, it boils down to this: Priests who are sexually active, whether gay or straight, are more numerous than officialdom would like to believe, and they often lead conflicted lives. Italy in particular, according to Abbate, has erected a "wall of silence" around the problem.

Interestingly, the French edition of *Sex and the Vatican* has been a sensation, with the initial print run selling out within a week as the book cracked best-seller lists, and a documentary for French TV now in the works. In Italy, however, the reaction has been far more ho-hum, with scant media interest and slow sales. In part, it may be that the *Panorama* scoop a year ago stole the book's thunder; in part, it may simply be that revelations of sexually active priests simply have become too familiar among Catholic insiders to provoke the same response.

It will be interesting to see what the market reaction is when *Sex and the Vatican* appears in English.

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Sometime back, I published a column posing the question of why Christianity doesn't have its own Holocaust literature, by which I meant compelling accounts of Christians throughout the 20th century who paid for their faith in blood, as well as the sadly long list of Christians who continue to be martyred today.



A magnificent example of what I had in mind is the new book *Dove muoiono i cristiani: Dall'Egitto all'Indonesia, viaggio nei luoghi in cui il cristianesimo è una minoranza perseguitata* (Where Christians are Dying: From Egypt to Indonesia, a Journey in Places where Christianity is a Persecuted Minority?), published by Mondadori.

The author is a talented Italian print and broadcast journalist, Francesca Paci, who's not usually a Catholic writer. Perhaps for that very reason, she brings just the right touch to her accounts of suffering Christians in Baghdad, North Korea, the Amazon, Nigeria, and several points beyond. The book is light on pious reflection, focusing instead on compelling human drama.

Paci is drawn to tell the stories of people who are typically abandoned and misunderstood by all sides in today's wars, of both the physical and the cultural sort. She quotes French intellectual Régis Debray, who fought alongside Che Guevara in the 1960s, that Christians in the Middle East today are the "blind spot" in the West's view of the world -- too "Christian" for progressives, too "foreign" for conservatives.

Another virtue of Paci's book is that it's not a statistical overview, put together behind a desk. It's instead a series of dispatches from the front lines, telling the individuals stories behind the broad patterns -- such as 28-year-old Fatima, one of the survivors of an Oct. 31, 2010, attack on Our Lady of Salvation Catholic church in Baghdad, where Al-Qaeda gunmen shouting *Allahu Akbar* killed at least 58 people.

Iraq's Christian community has been especially devastated over the last quarter-century. Prior to the First Gulf War in 1991, the Christian population of Iraq was estimated at over 2 million, one of the largest and most stable in the Middle East; today the best guess is around 400,000 and still falling. Iraqi Christians face a perfect storm of social and political chaos and rising Islamic fundamentalism, and they also have access to networks of overseas support.

Listening to Fatima tell Paci about how she pretended to be dead during the siege, hiding between a pair of corpses among fellow members of the choir, one begins to see that the real question is not why so many Iraqi Christians have left. It's where the courage comes from among those who choose to remain.

In Somalia, Paci quotes Bishop Giorgio Bertin of Djibouti, who's also the apostolic administrator of Mogadishu: "We Christians of Islamic Africa are basically political footballs, protected or attacked depending upon whether the government needs to shore up support with either the liberals or the conservatives."

Bertin explains to Paci that he hasn't been in Mogadishu for at least two years, where six of the seven traditional Christian churches in the city have been destroyed, and the only one left standing is closed because the small number of Christians is too frightened to gather for worship. Most of the remaining Christians have abandoned their baptismal names for Islamic-sounding names, he says, and even Bertin is forced to use a fake identity in order to get help to the few Christian families in the area.

Paci's book is an enormously helpful contribution to making such stories better known in the West. Here's

hoping that it not only finds an audience, but that it helps generate an entire new genre.

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