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Roman notebook: Strokes for Sant'Egidio and Dolan

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NCR Today

ROME -- I'm in Rome for most of February, primarily to cover three big-ticket Vatican stories: A summit on the sexual abuse crisis from today through Thursday at the Jesuit-run Gregorian University; a joint meeting of bishops from Africa and Europe Feb. 13-17; and the consistory on Feb. 18-19, when Pope Benedict XVI will create 22 new cardinals, including two Americans (Archbishops Timothy Dolan and Edwin O'Brien).

While I'm here, I'll be keeping my eye on whatever else is going on, since Rome is the crossroads of the Catholic world and there's always something percolating. To capture that surplus material, I'll be filing regular "reporter's notebook" pieces.

To kick things off, here are a couple of storylines from the last few days.

Support for Sant'Egidio

Americans tend to have a distorted view of the "new movements" in the Catholic church, seeing them as largely right-wing. That may be due in part to early critical books such as Gordon Urquhart's 1999 *The Pope's Armada*, but mostly it's because the only outfits that have much of a profile in the States, such as Opus Dei and the Legionaries of Christ, do skew to the conservative end of the spectrum.

(Technically, Opus Dei is a personal prelature and the Legion is a religious order, so neither is a "movement." Both, however, are 20th century creations, and thus part of the broad landscape of new ecclesial realities.)

Yet in Europe, and certainly in Italy, Catholics don't have the same tendency to associate the movements with a particular ideology, because the galaxy of well-known movements is considerably more diverse.

The Community of Sant'Egidio, arguably the movement with the single highest public profile in Italy, illustrates the point.

Launched in 1968 by a layman named Andrea Riccardi, who is now the Minister for International Cooperation in the government of Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti, Sant'Egidio was designed for progressive youth inspired by the revolutionary fervor of '68 who nevertheless wanted to stay Catholic. Today, it claims 60,000 members in 73 countries.

Originally focused on creating popular schools for the urban poor in Rome, Sant'Egidio went on to embrace ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, conflict resolution, global economic justice, support for women, the elderly, and children, and anti-death penalty activism – in other words, much of the social agenda of the Catholic left. Yet because of their deep spirituality and their willingness to steer clear of internal church debates, they enjoy robust confidence from the hierarchy and the Vatican.

That support has been on display again this month, as Sant'Egidio celebrates the 44th anniversary of its foundation.

On Feb. 1, a liturgy to mark the anniversary was held at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, traditionally the pope's church as Bishop of Rome. More than forty bishops attended, friends of Sant'Egidio from all over the world.

The homily was delivered by American Cardinal William Levada, the prefect of the Vatican's powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

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Levada praised Sant'Egidio as a "robust tree" of the church and a fruit of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), in particular of what Pope Paul VI called the "new humanism" inspired by the council, imbued with deep compassion for all forms of human suffering.

Levada said the secret of Sant'Egidio is that its social activity has unmistakable spiritual roots.

"Listening to the Word of God, and fidelity to the church, are the secret to the strength of this evangelical compassion," Levada told the Sant'Egidio members.

"The inseparable connection between prayer and love for the poor characterizes the heart of the charisma of the Community of Sant'Egidio, and makes it precious to the church of today," he said. "In effect, wherever the Community of Sant'Egidio is in the world, there you'll find men and women who pray and who love the poor, serving them as if they're serving the Lord himself."

In another sign of official favor, a longtime ecclesiastical assistant for the Community of Sant'Egidio, Italian Monsignor Matteo Zuppi, was recently named an auxiliary bishop of the Rome diocese by Pope Benedict XVI.

For ten years, Zuppi was the pastor of the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, the Rome neighborhood that's the headquarters of Sant'Egidio. The community holds its famous weekly vespers in the basilica, a service that typically draws overflow crowds, including a bevy of otherwise un-churched secular young Italians.

Back in 1992, Zuppi played a key role in negotiating the Mozambique peace accords, Sant'Egidio's

emblematic diplomatic success.

Another plum for Dolan

Speaking of official favor, it's not as if we needed another sign that Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York is a rising star in the Catholic hierarchy these days, but we got one anyway on Feb. 3.

The Vatican announced on that day that when all the members of the College of Cardinals meet in Rome on Feb. 17 for a day of prayer and reflection, the pope has asked Dolan to speak to them on the subject of "The Proclamation of the Gospel Today, from the Mission *Ad Gentes* to the New Evangelization."

Given that the College of Cardinals is also the electoral body which will pick the next pope, I suppose the significance of entrusting this unique platform to Dolan won't be lost on anyone. (By the way, today is Dolan's 62nd birthday, meaning he's still remarkably young by ecclesiastical standards.)

It was already clear that Dolan is exceedingly well-regarded by Benedict XVI and his Vatican team.

Benedict named Dolan to New York, the biggest stage in the American church, in 2009. When Benedict needed to put together an all-star team of English-speaking prelates to lead a visitation of the church in Ireland, to demonstrate his seriousness about that country's sexual abuse crisis, Dolan was on the list. Benedict also included Dolan among the A-list of global heavyweights named to his new Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, the project which is the apple of the pope's eye.

The Feb. 3 announcement that Dolan has been chosen to address his fellow cardinals, on the theme which is the pope's top personal priority, is thus simply another indication that Dolan is a trusted, and therefore powerful, figure — the most influential American prelate of his generation, and arguably in a long time.

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