

Vatican appeals for calm in teeth of leaks and scandals

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 14, 2012 NCR Today

ROME --In effect, the Vatican spokesperson addressed a plea to the media Monday night. Facing a seemingly never-ending series of leaks of confidential documents, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi called on the press to "make careful distinctions," to not "just throw everything together," and to not allow the reality of the situation to be "swallowed up in a whirlpool of confusion."

Betting houses did not immediately open a line on the odds of calm prevailing, but they would have to be astronomical.

In recent days, confidential correspondence related to charges of corruption and cronyism in Vatican finances, internal memos suggesting loopholes in a new papal anti-money laundering law, and even an anonymous letter hinting at a plot to kill the pope have all created media sensations.

Though in each case the Vatican has played down, even ridiculed, the content of the documents, they've also been forced to admit that the documents themselves are authentic.

Commentators in Italy have had a field day speculating about the motives for the leaks. Most Italian analysts read them as evidence of internal Vatican power struggles, related to an aging pontiff and a looming battle over the election of the next pope.

On Monday night, Lombardi released a written statement to Vatican Radio, which was immediately sent out to journalists. (Lombardi, who is also the head of Vatican Radio, will sometimes use the radio outlet to say things that he doesn't quite want to raise to the level of an official Vatican declaration.)

"Certainly there's something sad in the fact that internal documents are being passed in a disloyal fashion to the outside, in order to create confusion," Lombardi said. "But the responsibility lies on both sides -- whoever furnishes this kind of document, but also whoever uses it for ends which are certainly not the pure love of the truth."

In the teeth of the media storm, Lombardi called for "calm, cool heads, and much use of reason."

Lombardi went on to make two fundamental points.

First, he argued that Benedict's Vatican is making serious progress towards reform, both in the fight against the clerical sexual abuse scandals and in the direction of greater financial transparency. In fact, Lombardi said, the present round of leaks and criticism are a sign that "something important is in play."

"If someone thinks they can discourage the pope and his collaborators in this commitment, they're wrong and they're deluding themselves," he said.

As for behind-the-scenes tensions leading up to the next conclave, Lombardi insisted that all the popes elected in the last century were men of "indisputable spiritual worth," which suggests that the cardinals are capable of

keeping their eyes on the ball.

"An interpretation based on internal power struggles," he said, "depends in large measure on the moral coarseness of who's doing the interpreting, because often they're not capable of seeing things any other way."

Not everyone in the church, apparently, got Lombardi's memo.

Retired Bishop Luigi Bettazzi of Ivrea in Italy told a radio program on Monday that given the present atmosphere of crisis, Benedict XVI might just resign.

The pope seems "very tired," Bettazzi said, and in the face of "all the problems there are, maybe also in the face of tensions within the curia, he might think these are things a new pontiff will have to deal with."

If there's any consolation for the Vatican, it may be that so far, fascination with what even Lombardi called the Vatican's version of the Wikileaks scandal seems largely restricted to Italy, and to Italians.

Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide, Australia, for instance, is the President of the Australian bishops' conference and a point of reference among English-speaking bishops around the world. He's been in Rome for several days, for a summit on the sexual abuse crisis at the Gregorian University and then a meeting of English-speaking church officials called the "Anglophone Conference."

I spoke with him on Monday at the Domus Sanctae Martae, the \$20 million hotel on Vatican grounds where the cardinals reside when they're electing a pope.

I asked Wilson to what extent he was aware of the media frenzy surrounding leaked Vatican documents and perceptions of internal warfare.

"I don't know anything of that," he said. "I really don't. It's certainly not appeared in the press in Australia. Maybe somebody's sending things to me in e-mails and so on, but I don't read those things."

Has he, I asked, detected an atmosphere of crisis in the Sanctae Martae, where some Vatican officials live, and others pass by regularly?

"No, I haven't," he said. "As far as I can see, life here is exactly like it is any other time. It just rolls along. You have all the Vatican people working here, they move in and out, they have their meals, they say hello, and away you go."

"Life is normal," Wilson said.

Unfortunately for Lombardi, who can't afford to ignore the Vatican's penchant for becoming swept up in Italian soap operas, that's probably about right.

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