

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 24, 2012 at 8:51am

Is it time for a Jacobin pope? Plus, musings on an American

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

As a thought exercise, ask yourself what period of time the following paragraph about the Vatican seems to reflect.

"For those who've seen the place in better days, the Vatican looks deeply troubled. In the absence of strong leadership, internal tensions seem to be bursting into view. Even at the height of his powers, the pope took scant interest in governance. As he ages and becomes more limited, a sense of drift is mounting -- a conviction that hard choices must await a new day, and probably a new pontiff."

Although it seems perfectly apt in February 2012, in fact, that paragraph was written in late 2004. That's the irony: Many cardinals who elected Benedict XVI thought they were buying an end to the crisis of governance in the twilight of John Paul's reign, only to find they'd simply traded it in for a newer model.

In the abstract, Joseph Ratzinger seemed the man to put things right. As the saying went, Ratzinger was in the curia but not of it -- he knew where the bodies were buried, but he was never the stereotypical Vatican potentate, forever building empires and hatching schemes. Plus, he's hardly the extrovert John Paul was, so it seemed reasonable he might invest more energy in internal business.

Facing what is, alas, merely the latest implosion in the last six years, the mushrooming "Vatileaks" scandal, one has to ask: What went wrong? (The latest chapter of that saga came Wednesday when Italian TV aired an anonymous interview with an alleged mole who claimed to be one of at least 20 insiders leaking documents.)

It's become commonplace to say that Benedict XVI sees himself as a teaching pope, not a governor, and

that's obviously true. Still, Benedict actually has engineered a sort of limited reform inside the Vatican, and for those with eyes to see, it marks a real break with the past. Not so long ago, it was taken for granted that the following was just what Vatican heavyweights do, to some extent reflecting traditional Italian assumptions about men of state:

- Using positions of power to reward allies and block enemies, thereby building a network of patronage and influence.
- Moving money around without much of a paper trail, steering contracts and resources to one's friends and supporters.
- Turning a blind eye to the personal failings of people perceived as loyal to the church, the pope or influential figures in the hierarchy.
- Clandestine involvement in worldly politics and finance, justified as a way of advancing the interests of the church.

Slowly, Benedict XVI has tried to move people who embody a more transparent and less nakedly ambitious way of doing business into key positions. The question is, Has this gradual reform hit a brick wall? If it's dying the death of a thousand cuts, as some believe, what's the next step -- to go back, or to move forward to a more aggressive phase?

To invoke an analogy from revolutionary France, is it time for the Jacobins to wrest control from the moderates?

Benedict's limited reform is based on setting a moral tone and the idea that "personnel is policy," rather than any violent purge or direct overhaul of systems and structures. It began with the ultra-powerful Secretariat of State, where the stereotype of the "prelate as Renaissance prince" tends still to have the most legs.

It's well known that Benedict's pick to run the place, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, is an outsider known more for his personal devotion to the pope than as an independent powerbroker. The new "substitute," or chief of staff, Archbishop Giovanni Becciu, also never worked in the Secretariat, making him likewise a stranger to its palace intrigue. Becciu is cut from a different cloth in another sense, too. He's from the island of Sardinia, where people tend to think of themselves as quite different from mainland Italians --? quieter, more reflective, less given to schemes and theater. Supposedly, when Benedict XVI visited Sardinia in 2008, he quipped that "Sardinians aren't really Italians," which may be revealing in terms of what he thought he was doing by giving Becciu the job.

Consider, too, the three longtime friends Benedict chose to lead what he regards as the most important other Vatican offices: American Cardinal William Levada, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Congregation for Bishops; and Spanish Cardinal Antonio Cañizares Llovera, Congregation for Divine Worship.

Levada and Ouellet had some previous Vatican experience, but none represents the old guard. Nobody really suspects them of financial shenanigans or building their own ecclesiastical empires, and they spend precious little time in the limelight. Levada, for instance, has been on the job since 2005, and Cañizares since 2008, yet even some full-time Vatican writers would struggle to pick either man out of a lineup because they've maintained such a low profile.

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If the lone benchmarks of reform were a reputation for personal decency and not jockeying to be the next pope, you could probably declare the job finished and go home. Unfortunately, that recipe leaves two vital questions unanswered:

- What about guys inside the system who aren't on the same page and who may take Benedict's detachment as *carte blanche* to pursue their own agenda?
- Prayer and purification are great, but at some point, doesn't somebody also have to make the trains run on time?

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that Benedict's attempt at reform has paid a steep price for not confronting those two points head-on.

Facing that reality, three broad reactions seem possible. Each leads to a different conclusion about who might be the right choice when the time comes to elect a successor to Benedict XVI.

First, one could decide the reform was a nonstarter from the outset. In the words of Michelangelo, there's only one statue in this stone -- the Vatican is always going to have its careerists and its schemers, it's always going to have a subtext of petty turf wars and personal squabbles, so the trick is to put someone in charge who knows that world and is capable of keeping it under control. In other words, don't waste energy trying to change the place; settle for making it work.

If that's the logic, then a strong candidate for the next pope might be Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, currently prefect of the Congregation for Oriental Churches. A veteran of the curia, Sandri served as substitute under John Paul II, where he had a reputation as a strong administrator. As a bonus, he's an Argentine, so he could be presented to the world as a Latin American pope.

Second, in the spirit of thinking in centuries, one could argue that Benedict's reform simply hasn't had time to work itself out, and the key is staying the course. That seemed to be the spirit of a Feb. 13 statement from Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, on the Vatileaks mess. When somebody starts launching attacks, Lombardi said, it's usually a sign that "something important is in play." The suggestion appeared to be that products of the older Vatican culture know the earth is shifting beneath their feet, and the leaks represent their way of lashing out.

Ouellet would be a compelling choice for that school of thought. He's very much like Benedict -- quiet, spiritual, given to the life of the mind. He's someone who would likely emphasize teaching and moral leadership over institutional dynamics.

Third, one might conclude that Benedict's reform has its heart in the right place, but needs to be backed up by a stronger hand on the rudder. You need someone at the top who can not only set a tone, but who has the mettle to make it stick. That seems a prescription for a pope with strong credentials as a man of faith, but also experience at wrapping his hands around complex bureaucracies, with sufficient energy and fearlessness to take on the Vatican's entrenched culture.

Figure out which guy among the current crop of cardinals best fits that profile, and you'll have the "Jacobin" candidate.

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On this side of the water, the take-away from the consistory of February 2012 has been that for the first time in living memory, the hot new commodity in the College of Cardinals is actually an American, Timothy Dolan of New York.

Of course, a cardinal's star can fall as easily as it rises. In the consistory of 2001, for instance, the landslide winner of the beauty pageant was Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras, a handsome, articulate fresh face for the church's burgeoning Latin American contingent. Yet he didn't have any traction as a papal candidate in 2005, and by now the smart money says his ship has sailed.

Still, given the way Dolan took Rome by storm, the "American pope" question is in the air. Normally, the hypothesis gets knocked down almost as soon as it's raised on the basis of the longstanding taboo against a "superpower pope."

Yet it's possible to flip the bias against an American around in two ways.

First, Vatican diplomats often grouse that the American government doesn't pay enough attention to their concerns. That was the drumbeat in the run-up to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and it's still said today across a range of matters, including the Middle East, development in Africa and the life issues.

Consider this: Can you think of a better way to get the attention of the White House -- no matter who the occupant might be -- than to elect an American pope?

There is the risk, of course, that U.S.-Vatican relations could be hijacked by domestic politics under an American pope, but it wouldn't have to play out that way. In any event, it certainly would ensure that Washington keeps Rome on the radar.

Second, one could argue that in ecclesiastical terms, it's the Italians who are the traditional superpower, not the Americans or anybody else. The real choice for a "superpower pope" would therefore be putting the papacy back in Italian hands, while an American (or, for that matter, any non-European) would actually represent evolution toward a more "multi-polar" church.

Given the way papal politics works, cardinals won't be caught dead talking about specific candidates. In the months to come, however, it will be fascinating to track what they have to say in general terms about where the next pope might come from -- and if the idea of an American seems to be growing in plausibility.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR*'s senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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