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A less political Vatican, a less self-referential church?

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today
Pope Francis

Rome — There's no grand narrative out of the Eternal City today, but there are four smaller storylines percolating which seem to have something interesting to say about the Vatican, the new pope, and/or the broader Catholic landscape.

A less political Vatican?

At the time Benedict XVI's papacy officially ended on Feb. 28, Italy had no functioning government because of the massively inconclusive results of Feb. 24-25 national elections. By this writing, the Catholic church has had a new pope for more than a month, while Italy is no closer whatsoever to a transition in power.

A noted Italian writer had an ironic piece yesterday arguing that against all odds, the 115 cardinals who elected Francis did a far better job of translating their anti-establishment mood into a program of governance than the millions of Italians did in splitting their votes across three basically irreconcilable coalitions.

The next act of the quagmire started unfolding today, as Italy's lower house of parliament attempted to elect a successor for the largely symbolic role of the country's president. Predictably, they were unable, at least on the first round, to find anyone who could garner the necessary two-thirds consensus. The anointed candidate of the major political formations fell short, and the insurgents signaled little interest in compromise.

From the pope-watch point of view, what's most interesting is that moments of political chaos in Italy are generally when the Vatican steps to the fore, exercising its historical role as a moral authority and voice of

tradition in Italian affairs.

Yet in the run-up to today's presidential balloting, the silence from the Vatican has been fairly deafening.

Today's *La Stampa* has a piece collecting recent commentary on the political crossroads from the Italian bishops, especially Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco of Genoa, president of the conference, to the effect that whoever becomes president should express "realism regarding the concrete problems of the people," especially "the absence of work, the difficult financial situation, and overdue structural reforms."

Bagnasco also signaled openness to the election of a woman, saying what matters is "the personal capacity" of the candidate and his, or her, "intellectual and moral profile."

The *La Stampa* report adds: "The Vatican's Secretariat of State" is awaiting future new internal arrangements" and "appears less interested in Italian political events than in the recent past."

The reticence from the Vatican to wade into the Italian political mess could be simply due to the fact that everyone expects a new Secretary of State to be named sometime soon, so incumbent Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone is more or less already a lame duck. It could also be that under a pope who's not only non-Italian but an outsider to the Italian scene, there's a natural period of adjustment.

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On the other hand, this could also be an early expression of the collegiality and decentralization that many observers expect Francis to deliver: Keeping the Vatican out of the Italian political fray, allowing the local bishops' conference to carry the weight.

It could also hint at a less overtly political edge to the Vatican under Francis across the board. This is, after all, a pope who admitted in a 2010 interview book that he hadn't even voted in elections in Argentina since the early 1960s, to make sure that "I cannot be wrapped in a political flag."

An award for Lombardi

Allianz, the Germany-based global financial services giant, was in Rome today to bestow an award on Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson. The ceremony was conducted in the Holy See Press Office, and although the event itself was private, it was made available on closed-circuit TV to the press corps.

Lombardi's deputy, Passionist Fr. Ciro Benedettini, told me that the communications personnel of Allianz stage an annual meeting in one of the countries where they do business, and this year is Italy's turn. They're in the habit, he said, of honoring someone who exemplifies excellence in communications, and because of Lombardi's role during the recent high drama in the Vatican, they picked him.

A certificate presented to Lombardi said he was being honored for his "decisive example of rationality and prospective thinking," presented with "a serene heart and reassuring arguments."

It lauded the Jesuit spokesperson as a model of "confronting complexity with irony, but never with superficiality."

"He's a master of understatement," it said, "capable of dissolving tensions with simplicity and listening" "expressing in every moment the tranquility of one who knows how to govern words and truth with style

and humility, vision and responsibility.?

During the recent tumult surrounding the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI and the election of Pope Francis, Lombardi won generally high marks for putting the Vatican's Press Office into over-drive, conducting daily briefings. He also brought in two priests with a background in media relations to assist with the English and Spanish-speaking press, Fr. Tom Rosica of Canada and Fr. Gil Tamayo of Spain.

During his remarks to the Allianz group this morning, Lombardi offered a couple of typically self-deprecating asides. When he was first named to the post of Vatican spokesperson, he confessed, he wondered if his superiors really knew what they were doing, since he didn't have any background or experience as a front man.

Over time, he said, he became more comfortable in the role ? perhaps in part because of something Lombardi said later, which is as time wore on the movers and shakers inside the system also became more inclined to respond when he called on them for help.

Pro-Life Summit

Famously, one key difference between Catholic culture in the United States and in Europe is that because abortion is largely a settled political question on the Old Continent, the term "pro-life" in Catholic parlance often has a more expansive sense here. It generally refers not just to opposition to abortion, but to a wider range of concerns about human life and dignity ? care for the sick and the elderly, for instance, for the disabled, and for the poor.

That's seemingly the ethos of a major pro-life rally the Vatican is planning to stage June 15-16, as part of the church's "Year of Faith" and under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization.

The event is named *Evangelium Vitae*, in honor of Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical on matters of human life.

Fr. Agostino Chendi, under-secretary of the Pontifical Council for Health Care, an office which is also working on the event's logistics, says its target audience is the "pro-life world in a broad sense."

Groups scheduled to take part, Chendi said, include doctors and nurses, other health workers, and associations for the infirm and the disabled, as well as politicians and other public figures who work in these areas.

The program begins on Saturday, June 15, with a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Peter, followed by Mass and catechism in various languages. The afternoon will feature Eucharistic adoration and a prayer vigil. Sunday the group will take part in a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica scheduled to be celebrated by Pope Francis.

Cardinal Séan O'Malley of Boston is scheduled to speak as part of the conference at the Pontifical Urbanian College, followed by a discussion panel with Francis Beckwith of Baylor University and Robert Royal of the "Faith and Reason Institute" based in Washington, D.C.

O'Malley's profile recently rose after Francis named him the lone American on a group of eight cardinals to advise the new pope on governance of the universal church and reform of the Roman Curia. The June conference will be O'Malley's first public appearance in Rome since that appointment.

How's that sound?

Though there's not much news value to it, Pope Francis sent a note to the bishops of Argentina currently meeting in Pilar for their 105th plenary assembly that contains a cute wrinkle.

Apologizing for his absence, the pope said he couldn't make it due to "recently received commitments", and then added as an aside: "How's that sound?"

On matters of substance, Francis used the letter to repeat language that became deeply familiar over his 15 years as the Archbishop of Buenos Aires and six years as president of the Argentine conference, stressing his desire for a church that gets out of the sacristy and into the streets.

"A church that doesn't get out, sooner or later, gets sick from being locked up," he said. "It's also true that getting out in the street runs the risk of an accident, but frankly I prefer a church that has accidents a thousand times to a church that gets sick."

A self-referential church, the pope writes, suffers from "a kind of narcissism that leads to spiritual worldliness and sophisticated clericalism."

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