

Four fronts where the Vatican isn't the real problem

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 3, 2013 All Things Catholic

When Pope Francis met Israeli President Shimon Peres on Tuesday, the two men certainly had lots to talk about: the general situation in the Middle East, the conflict in Syria, the landscape of interfaith relations and the possibility of a papal visit to the Holy Land.

By all accounts, the meeting was warm and constructive, symbolizing how far relations have come.

Also lurking as subtext, however, was a long-running and, up to now, futile effort to reach agreement on the tax and legal status of church properties in Israel. A communique issued at the end of the meeting tried to put an optimistic spin on the situation, asserting that a "rapid conclusion is foreseen."

Reportedly the outlines of a deal were reached last January, under which church properties used for religious purposes would remain tax-exempt, but not church-owned businesses. Israel would designate certain holy sites as safe from expropriation except in emergency situations for public safety, and a leasing arrangement would be worked out for the Cenacle on Mount Zion.

Although one never knows, experience says don't hold your breath.

Both Israel and the Vatican are under new management, and the architects of this deal (former Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon for the Israelis, former Undersecretary of State Ettore Balestrero for the Vatican) have moved on. The two sides are scheduled to meet again in June, when we should get an indication of where the new leadership will come down.

December will mark the 20th anniversary of the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See, and a deal about its terms in regards to taxes and other technicalities has allegedly been imminent ever since. I've known five Israeli ambassadors to the Holy See, all of whom have arrived predicting swift movement only to see those hopes run up against reality.

To broaden the focus, there are four quagmires I've come to regard over the years as the Vatican's "Neverending Stories." They are:

- Negotiations with Israel over the Fundamental Agreement
- The prospect of formal diplomatic relations with China
- Efforts to end the Lefebvrist schism
- Hopes for a papal visit to Russia and an ecumenical spring with the Russian Orthodox

In each case, there's a highly predictable boom-and-bust cycle. Every six months or so, somebody will report momentum toward breaking the logjam, which causes a brief flurry of excitement. Before long, something else happens to suggest that promise was false or overheated, and we all go back to waiting for Godot.

My policy now with regard to purported turning points is, "Wake me up when it's over."

While there's little hard news on any of these fronts, there is nevertheless an interesting observation to be made. In each case, blame for failure to move the ball doesn't belong exclusively, or even primarily, in Rome.

The clearest example is relations with the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, popularly known as the Lefebvrists.

Short of standing outside their headquarters in Ecône, Switzerland, in the snow and begging forgiveness like Henry IV at Canossa, Benedict XVI did everything possible to heal the split, and yet the society balked. In an Easter letter to friends and benefactors, Bishop Bernard Fellay asserted that Rome has imposed acceptance of the Second Vatican Council as a *sine qua non* -- a prerequisite, Fellay wrote, "to which we could not and still cannot subscribe."

Many observers believe it's now "game over," at least for the foreseeable future and barring some surprising concession on the Lefebvrist side. (Here's a prediction: Rejection of Benedict's overtures will go down as the "Camp David" moment for the Lefebvrists, comparable to Yasser Arafat turning down a 2000 deal that would have given the Palestinians basically 95 percent of what they wanted.)

As far as China and the Russian Orthodox go, the Vatican is certainly capable of taking steps that, whatever their logic, set things back.

In 2000, for instance, 120 Chinese martyrs were canonized Oct. 1, a national holiday in China celebrating the advent of Communist rule. The choice was seen by Chinese authorities as a slap in the face despite the Vatican's insistence that Oct. 1 is the feast of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, universal patroness of the missions.

In 2002, meanwhile, the Vatican announced that four apostolic administrations in Russia had been elevated to the status of dioceses, prompting charges from the Orthodox of expansion and proselytism. The decision was apparently made without consulting the Orthodox or, for that matter, even the Vatican's official for ecumenical relations at the time, Cardinal Walter Kasper.

Yet in both cases, it's tough to style the Vatican as the primary impediment.

Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the former Secretary of State, once famously said that if China would agree to diplomatic relations, the Vatican would pull the plug on its embassy in Taiwan "not tomorrow morning, but tonight." In truth, most China-watchers believe the real obstacle lies with unresolved tensions between pragmatists and Communist hard-liners within the country's ruling elite, resulting in a sort of multiple personality syndrome when it comes to religious policy.

Most recently, the auxiliary bishop of Shanghai, Thaddeus Ma Daqin, has been under house arrest since he publicly renounced his membership in the Patriotic Association, a government-sponsored body designed to keep the Catholic church on a short leash.

In Russia, despite a clear trend in recent years toward an ecumenical thaw, there remains a deep skepticism about Rome and the papacy that often renders even well-meaning gestures a bit ambivalent.

Last month, for example, the Moscow Patriarchate issued a largely laudatory statement welcoming the election of Pope Francis. Not long afterward, Moscow's top ecumenical officer, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, said if the new pope really wants better relations, he should curb the growth of the Greek Catholic church in Ukraine, which Moscow regards as an illicit Catholic footprint on its "canonical territory."

Paranoia about Catholic proselytism runs deep, despite the fact that the Vatican during the John Paul years basically imposed a no-growth policy. If you want to see proselytism in Russia, you'd be better advised to look to the evangelicals and Pentecostals, not the Catholics. A study published last year about evangelical growth in Russia was titled the "Post-Soviet Gold Rush."

I once asked a Russian Orthodox bishop why they were so worried about Catholic expansion and not about the burgeoning Pentecostal and evangelical presence. His answer: "They're here today and gone tomorrow, but the Catholics will be here forever."

(For the record, I tried to explain that's exactly what Catholic bishops a generation ago thought about evangelicals and Pentecostals in Latin America -- here today, gone tomorrow -- and they were wrong. He wasn't buying it, illustrating that experience may be the best teacher, but usually it has to be your own and not somebody else's.)

To return to Israel and the Fundamental Agreement, there's no doubt both sides bear responsibility for the delay.

From the Vatican's point of view, they want the legal status of church properties to be governed by treaty, not by the shifting policies of the Israeli parliament. Reasonably enough, Vatican negotiators ask what the point is of negotiating a bilateral agreement if its terms can be unilaterally revised by one of the parties.

On the Israeli side, they have legitimate concerns about ceding sovereign powers over their territory, especially given the price Israel has paid to gain them. They also have reasonable concerns about setting a precedent, because whatever deal they cut with the Vatican, it would be tough to deny other religious groups the same treatment.

For its part, the Vatican has tried to clear perceived obstacles. In 2011, for instance, Franciscan Fr. David-Maria Jaeger was made a judge of the Roman Rota, an honor that also had the effect of relieving him as general counsel to the Holy See in its negotiations with Israel. The fact that Jaeger is a convert from Judaism had been a source of heartburn for some on the Israeli side; the fact that he was also a tough negotiator who knows Israeli law and politics from the inside out was probably also a factor.

On background, participants on both sides say they badly want to wrap things up. The primary difficulty now, they say, is galvanizing political momentum in Israel, including in the Knesset, to give whatever agreement they reach the force of law. It remains to be seen where that will rate on the to-do list of the new government of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Adding it all up, the somewhat counterintuitive conclusion is that in what one might consider the Vatican's four most intractable relationships, the basic problem isn't really classic Roman truculence.

It takes two to tango, and more often than you might think, the Vatican is the one eager to dance but missing a partner.

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