

Weekend roundup: The immigrant pope, Pius XII, the 'gay lobby', and a baby named Francis

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 20, 2014 NCR Today
Rome

Although the NFL playoffs may have dominated weekend conversation in the States, it was another busy period on the pope-watch beat, characteristic of a pontiff who simply has no "off" switch. The following is a round-up of storylines that bubbled up and that shed light on some aspect of the Francis story.

The Immigrant Pope

Jorge Mario Bergoglio was born into a family of Italian immigrants in Argentina, and now is returning the favor as a Bishop of Rome drawn from "the ends of the earth." That may help explain the special passion for immigrants that's among the hallmarks of his papacy, and that was on display again on Sunday in his visit to the Roman parish of Sacro Cuore di Gesù a Castro Pretorio.

The Salesian-run parish, located near Rome's main train station of Termini, is noted for its outreach to the area's homeless and migrant population. During his parish visit, Francis made a special point of meeting with a group of 60 homeless persons and roughly 100 young immigrants, along with the parish volunteers who work with them.

During his Angelus address earlier in the day, Francis told immigrants that "you are close to the heart of the church" and said that he thinks often of the hardships many of them are forced to endure.

Using strong language, the pope cited Blessed Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, a 19th century Italian bishop who founded a religious order specialized in the care of migrants and refugees, to condemn "merchants of human flesh" who traffic in migrants.

The pope also called on wealthy nations to be "welcoming" of immigrants and to "preserve their values."

Jan. 19 is set aside by the Catholic church as the "World Day of Migrants and Refugees." In a message for the occasion released back in August, Francis famously insisted that immigrants are not "pawns on the chessboard of humanity."

As a footnote, this was Francis' fourth visit to a Roman parish since his election. As he has on other occasions, the pope had no text or notes for his homily, which focused on the Gospel reading of John the Baptist saying of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

Among other things, the first Jesuit pope invited his listeners to engage in a mini-version of the famous Ignatian spiritual exercises, closing their eyes and imagining themselves in the Gospel scene and saying something to Jesus in the silence of their hearts.

Pius XII

Last week the pope's old friend Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Buenos Aires was in town, leading a Jewish delegation from Argentina. Back in 2010, the two men published a book of their conversations titled *On Heaven and Earth*.

After their reunion last week, Skorka gave an interview to the *Sunday Times* saying that, among other things, the pope and rabbi had discussed possible sainthood for Pius XII, the wartime pontiff whose record on the Holocaust remains a sticking point between Catholics and Jews.

According to Skorka, Francis expressed the view that a decision on beatification and canonization should not be made until the Vatican archives from the World War II era are completely open, which has long been a central demand of critics.

When Pius XII was declared "venerable" in December 2009, a statement from Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, called it "deplorable" that he might be made a saint before "all the documents" are released.

"The question is very delicate, and we have to continue to analyze it," Skorka said.

Interviewed by *Corriere della Sera*, Bishop Sergio Pagano of the Vatican Secret Archives said that the effort to finish cataloguing all the holdings from that era has been underway for six years, and that it will probably take another year to year and a half to finish the job.

Remaining documents from that era still to be released include correspondence from papal embassies, notes from the Secretariat of State, and the working papers of various Roman congregations.

Some experts doubt those materials will add much to the record already established in the 12-volume set of documents from the WWII era published by the Vatican back in 1965, but the comment by Skorka would seem to suggest that Francis is willing to wait.

In his 2010 book with the rabbi, the future pope said, "The arguments I've heard in favor of Pius XII seem strong, but I have to admit I haven't examined all the archives."

The Pope and the Media

On Saturday Jan. 18, Francis held an audience for personnel of the Italian state broadcaster RAI, which is marking the 90th anniversary this year of its radio operation and the 60th anniversary of its television service. Given that RAI is a fairly massive operation, the session was held in the Paul VI audience hall, which was packed.

Francis had some interesting thoughts on journalism and the communications enterprise to present, telling the broadcasters that their job is not just "information" but also "formation," which implies a moral dimension.

The pontiff said that journalism serves the public good when it steers clear of "disinformation, defamation, and calumny" — leaving the impression he doesn't necessarily believe that's always the case.

In impromptu remarks, Francis also called on the media to pay special attention to the "peripheries of the world," another constant theme of his young papacy.

Scandals

The weekend also brought fresh developments in two recent scandals.

First, new details emerged in the story of Roxana Rodriguez, a 33-year-old nun from El Salvador and member of the "Little Disciples of Jesus" congregation who showed up at a hospital in the Italian city of Rieti last week complaining of stomach pains and ended up giving birth to a baby boy.

According to a local official with Caritas, the Catholic charitable organization, Rodriguez had returned to El Salvador in March and April of 2013 to renew her passport, where she briefly renewed a romance she'd had as a young girl. She didn't believe anything had resulted from it, however, and was apparently unaware she was pregnant.

Members of the congregation say they noticed her becoming somehow larger in recent weeks, but didn't think anything was amiss. Reportedly, Rodriguez called herself an ambulance to get to the hospital Tuesday night, and when informed she was pregnant told the doctor, "I can't have a child, I'm a nun!"

The local bishop announced that Rodriguez would have to leave religious life, and that the diocese stood ready to offer her whatever help she needs to be able to care for her child. A friend was quoted in the local paper as saying she may return to El Salvador, to reunite the child with the father.

There's no real pope connection to the story, save this: Rodriguez named the boy "Francis," in honor, she said, "of our beautiful Latin American pope."

Meanwhile, a former commander of the Swiss Guards gave an interview to a Swiss weekly in which he asserted that there's a "gay lobby" in the Vatican that forms a sort of "secret society" and could pose a risk "to the security of the pope."

Elmar Mäder, 51, served as commander of the Guards from 2002 to 2008.

Mäder said that gays in the Vatican "tend to support each other, and that makes them more loyal to one another than to the institution." He also said he had advised his men to steer clear of a few Vatican officials he considered especially "lascivious."

Two weeks ago, the same Swiss weekly published an anonymous interview with a former member of the Swiss Guard who claimed to have been subjected to unwanted advances from a couple of senior Vatican personnel, including a cardinal.

At the time, a spokesperson for the Guard dismissed the report, saying "Rumors of a gay lobby in the Vatican aren't our problem."

Francis himself has said slightly different things about a supposed "gay lobby."

Aboard the papal plane returning from Brazil in July, he appeared to dismiss the idea, quipping that "I have yet to find on a Vatican identity card the word 'gay'." Yet in a private session with leaders of Latin American religious orders around the same time, the pope reportedly said, "The 'gay lobby' is mentioned, and it is true, it is there. We need to see what we can do."

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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