

## Church's 'power distance index' in decline

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 4, 2009 All Things Catholic

Given all the recent American Catholic ferment -- the Kennedy funeral, the surprise resignation of Scranton's Bishop Joseph Martino, debates over health care reform, etc. -- it's been understandably tough for Catholic news from anywhere else in the world to register. Yet there's a bizarre story out of Italy this week that deserves its moment in the sun.

It's a soap opera, really, as tawdry and tragic as these bits of voyeurism usually are, yet it also suggests two points with potentially broad implications:

- The political and cultural ties in the West that in recent decades have bound the church to the political right may be unraveling.
- The "Power Distance Index" in Catholicism, meaning the willingness of ordinary people to accept the authority of the bishops to manage the internal affairs of the church, is declining rapidly, and not just in countries scarred by the sexual abuse crisis.

I'll sketch the details in a moment, but first, here's a thought exercise for American readers to capture the drama of what's happened.

Imagine that while President George Bush was still in office, he had been engulfed by something like the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and that the Catholic News Service, the official news agency of the U.S. bishops, had carried strong editorials insisting that Bush must explain his behavior. Next, imagine that the editor-in-chief of CNS was accused on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* of being a homosexual who had harassed a woman because he had an affair with her husband. Imagine further that *The Wall Street Journal* was owned by Bush's brother, so that many suspected political payback. Next, imagine that in protest of the accusation, the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops cancelled a one-on-one dinner with Bush, while conservative politicians split between defenders of the church and defenders of *The Wall Street Journal*. Finally, imagine that the CNS editor resigned, with many American Catholics regarding him as a martyr to a vicious political attack.

If any of those things were true, we'd be talking about the deepest church-state crisis in recent American history, one with profound implications for the perceived alliance between the Catholic hierarchy and the Republican Party. For the record, of course, none of the above is even remotely true, but it comes awfully close to capturing what's unfolded in Italy over the last couple of weeks.

### What's Happened

In recent months, conservative Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a 72-year-old media and real estate tycoon who's also known as something of a lothario, has been plagued by one personal scandal after another. Allegations include that women were paid to attend parties at his Sardinian villa, while a high-class prostitute said she spent a night with him at his Rome residence. His second wife, a former actress, has filed for divorce

on the basis of his alleged "infatuation" with young women.

The Vatican has not had much publicly to say, but not so *L'Avvenire*, the official newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference. Edited by Catholic layman Dino Boffo, *L'Avvenire* has published essays suggesting that Berlusconi has set a poor moral tone and needs to make full disclosure. Boffo is a well-known figure, among other things credited with engineering a spike in both *L'Avvenire's* circulation and its relevance.

Last Friday, all hell broke loose around Boffo.

The secular daily *Il Giornale*, which is owned by Berlusconi's brother and edited by a legendary conservative journalist named Vittorio Feltri, published a front-page "scoop" claiming that in 2004, Boffo was charged in an Italian court for harassment on the basis of a series of phone calls made during late 2001 and early 2002 to a woman in the city of Terni. (Under Italian law, the case remained confidential.) *Il Giornale* produced an alleged court document suggesting that Boffo, who is unmarried, is a "well-known homosexual" who made the calls because he had had an affair with the woman's husband. The document, it turns out, had been mailed anonymously to all the bishops in Italy three months before the *Il Giornale* report.

Boffo immediately claimed that the document is a fake, and he may well be right. Italian magistrates have said there's nothing in their files about Boffo's sexual orientation, and that several other details in the document are obviously wrong. (For example, it asserts that Boffo's phone was wiretapped, which magistrates say didn't happen.) Thus there is real doubt about the document's authenticity.

On the other hand, magistrates have also confirmed that there was indeed a process against Boffo for making harassing phone calls, that those phone calls included references to sexual relations between the unnamed woman and another man, and that Boffo paid a fine of roughly \$800. Boffo has claimed that he paid the fine because he considered it an administrative technicality, not an admission of guilt. Moreover, he has asserted that someone else made the calls using his cell phone, although magistrates say they looked into that possibility at the time and judged it "not credible."

In typical Italian fashion, in other words, the truth remains somewhat obscure. To date, judges have refused to release the complete file on Boffo, citing privacy concerns.

In one sense, however, the truth almost doesn't matter. Psychologically, Italians have long adhered to an inverted form of Occam's Razor: the most complex possible explanation of any set of facts is likely to be correct. In this case, Italians almost unanimously agree that whatever the reality behind the charges, news value wasn't why *Il Giornale* published them. Instead, it's because Berlusconi's brother owns *Il Giornale*, because *L'Avvenire* and the Italian bishops have been critical of Berlusconi, and this was a way of punching the church in the nose. (For the record, Feltri has denied coordinating publication with Berlusconi or anyone in his government.)

The leadership ranks of both the Italian church and the Vatican have circled the wagons around Boffo. Last Friday, the president of the Italian bishops' conference, Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco of Genova, called the charges against Boffo "disgusting." The Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, cancelled a dinner with Berlusconi last Friday night in protest. Pope Benedict XVI telephoned Bagnasco early this week to express full support, and the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, has alluded to "the suspicion that someone wants to foment confusion by spreading false accusations."

Despite that show of support, Boffo resigned on Thursday. In a three-page letter to Bagnasco, he asserted that he was the victim of a "colossal set-up" which was "fictional and diabolically executed." Nonetheless, Boffo wrote, "I cannot accept that my name will continue to be the focus of a daily war of words, upsetting my family and leaving Italians ever more dismayed."

For his part, Feltri remains defiant, writing: "Bagnasco judges our 'attack' to be disgusting, but doesn't find the episode that generated it, the protagonist of which was Dino Boffo, disgusting? What kind of morality is that? Since when is reporting a crime worse than committing it?" On Tuesday, *Il Giornale* splashed a banner headline across its front page asserting, "The bishops knew everything for a long time," while the subhead accused them of "pretending to know nothing."

### **What it Means**

God alone knows how the story might develop from here -- whether we'll ever know what, if anything, really transpired between Boffo and the woman in Terni, or who might have concocted the "secret memo." (It's probably a fair question whether any of us actually need to know, especially on the first point.) In the meantime, two broader observations suggest themselves.

First, the Boffo affair seems likely to nudge the church into a more non-partisan stance, loosening its ties to the political right. Much like in the United States, in Italy in recent years the hierarchy has been driven into a marriage of convenience with conservative political forces, mostly due to hot-button moral issues such as gay unions, euthanasia, and artificial reproduction. In fact, the Italian church is counting on its alliance with the center-right this fall in a parliamentary debate over a restrictive new law on euthanasia. While Boffo's travails are thus unlikely to make either the Vatican or the Italian bishops more favorably inclined to the left, the case may at least render church officials wary of uncritical alliances with any political formation.

This is an especially plausible trajectory, given that a growing number of conservative European politicians seem to want to put some distance between themselves and the church. In Italy, the heir-apparent to Berlusconi as the leader of the center-right, Gianfranco Fini, has warned against moving toward an "ethical state" rather than a "secular state" -- the former widely understood to mean a state dominated by Catholic moral precepts.

Lest one think that any such development will be confined to Italy, it's important to recall that Rome is where a broad cross-section of the church's leadership class congregates. Catholic bishops from around the world spend considerable chunks of time in Italy -- they may have studied in Rome as seminarians or young priests, some of them have had assignments in the Vatican, and many take both working trips and vacations to Italy. For many bishops, Italian is the language they know best after their own, and Italian culture is where they feel most comfortable away from home. As a result, Italian developments wield a disproportionate influence in shaping the imagination of the policy-setting class in the church. If Catholic institutions in Italy, especially the Vatican and the Italian bishops, reconfigure their political allegiances, it may set a tone elsewhere.

Second, the Boffo affair offers another reminder that the era in which most people, most of the time, were willing to trust bishops to manage the internal affairs of the church is long dead.

Back in the 1960s and '70s, Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede, then working for IBM, famously developed what's called the "Power Distance Index." It measures how much a particular culture values and respects authority. Highly traditional Malaysia consistently scores at the top, followed by several Latin American and Arab nations. At the bottom are keenly egalitarian societies such as New Zealand, Denmark and Austria.

Applied to Catholicism, one might say the Boffo affair illustrates that while the church may once have been Malaysia, today it's more like New Zealand.

Once upon a time, had a journalist such as Feltri stumbled across a scandal involving a prominent ecclesiastical personality, he would have privately passed the information along to the bishops and let them make the call. (Although Feltri is a non-believer, that's simply how things worked in ultra-Catholic Italy.) Today, the tendency is to try to publicly shame the bishops into action. That's no novelty in the United States, of course, after the

sexual abuse crisis, but the Boffo saga illustrates that it's happening across the board.

In that light, an essay on Wednesday by famed Italian Catholic writer Vittorio Messori is particularly revealing. To be clear, Messori is no dissident. He's the only journalist to have collaborated on books with two different popes: *The Ratzinger Report* with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in 1984, and *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* with John Paul II in 1994. Yet there Messori was in *Corriere della Sera*, scolding the Italian bishops for failing to move Boffo to a less "exposed" position back in 2004. They should have known, Messori argued, that even the whiff of scandal around Boffo would do damage to the church. In an earlier age, someone like Messori would have made that argument behind the scenes, if at all; today, he's got no qualms about needling bishops in public for, in his eyes, failing to do their job.

Whether this decline in the Catholic "Power Distance Index" is good or bad -- and, undoubtedly, it's some of each -- is beside the point. It's a reality, even in Italy. That's precisely the burden of being a Catholic bishop these days: leading a high-PDI institution in a low-PDI age.

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Several readers have asked for any insight I might have on two stories burning up the Catholic blogosphere: the Martino resignation, and reports of a new liturgical "reform of the reform" brewing in the Vatican.

I have little to offer on Martino, save this: It's almost certainly a mistake to interpret his resignation, worked out in consultation with both the papal nuncio Archbishop Pietro Sambi and Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, in a political key, as a repudiation of his outspoken pro-life views or an expression of the Vatican's allegedly softer line vis-à-vis the Obama administration. (That was the gist, for example, of a Sept. 2 report in the on-line edition of *Time*.)

When a bishop steps down before the retirement age and isn't given another position, the explanation is almost invariably pastoral rather than political. In some cases the cause is poor physical health, though anyone who watched Martino at his press conference this week could see that he's not on death's door. Other times, there's something personal about the bishop -- his psychological or emotional state, his relationships with priests and laity, his approach to administration -- that makes him unable to govern. Needless to say, such difficulties can fester on any point of the ideological compass.

Theologically, the episcopacy isn't just a job that one quits on two week's notice. It's understood by way of analogy to marriage, so allowing a bishop to resign early (or encouraging him to go) isn't a step taken lightly. As a practical matter, the Vatican doesn't like to see bishops driven out by political pressure, fearing that it sets a dangerous precedent. Likewise, few bishops are eager to see a colleague fall simply for ideological reasons. One never knows when the political winds might shift, and the bell will toll for thee.

One suspects, therefore, that the problem with Martino wasn't his pro-life politics, but a breakdown in relationships and communication in Scranton, coupled with the stress of managing a diocese struggling to sustain its parishes, schools and other institutions. (That, of course, is more or less what Martino himself has said, though without going into much detail.) The proof is that there are plenty of other conservative, strongly pro-life bishops in America who haven't felt any pressure to step aside.

As for speculation about new liturgical rules: Signs indicate that there's less "there there" than some reports have suggested. I'm preparing a news story for the print edition of NCR on this topic, so here I'll simply report that I've spoken to people who've seen the propositions adopted at the recent plenary assembly of the Congregation for Divine Worship, and they tell me that there was nothing on hot-button topics such as communion in the hand or the orientation of the altar. Instead, they call for a more generic review of the liturgical books, with an eye to curbing some abuses and generally fostering greater reverence.

One source put it this way: "Especially in the English-speaking world, Benedict knows that now is not the time for more upheaval, since we already have the new Roman Missal on the way."

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