

Vatican writer floats theory on mystery about pope's encyclical

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 9, 2009 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

I'm in Brazil this week, speaking at a seminar on the always-volatile relationship between the church and the media at a couple of seminars sponsored by the International Institute for Social Sciences in São Paulo. Though we're just one day into the event, there are already a couple of nuggets worth recording.

Yesterday, a veteran Italian writer on Vatican affairs floated an intriguing hypothesis about a recent mystery surrounding the release of Pope Benedict XVI's social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. In effect, he argued that anonymous leaks of the encyclical a few days before it came out in early July represented the first stirrings of a new "dynamic communications strategy" in the Vatican.

Marco Tosatti, the longtime Vatican writer for the Italian daily *La Stampa*, ticked off the wearily familiar litany of recent Vatican communications debacles: Regensburg, Pope Benedict XVI's comments on condoms during his trip to Africa, the flap over lifting the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop, and so on. Tosatti argued that the church needs a "dynamic strategy" for communications, rather than waiting for a bomb to go off before defusing it.

From there, he turned to the small mystery about *Caritas in Veritate*, which was presented in a Vatican press conference on Tuesday, July 7. Prior to the official release of the document, extensive extracts appeared in the Italian press and were quickly picked up around the world. Those "scoops" set the tone for early reception of the encyclical, which was generally quite positive -- styling it as a forceful papal intervention on the global economic crisis and in favor of a robust public role in the economy.

Tosatti explained that in this case, the scoops weren't the result of intrepid reporting but rather a still-unexplained mystery. The Friday before the press conference, envelopes containing a synthesis of the encyclical, along with extended quotations from it, were anonymously delivered to several Italian newspapers (though, he noted pointedly, not all). Tosatti said that even a brief analysis made it clear that the synthesis was legitimate, in the sense that whoever wrote it had access to the encyclical.

Thus forty-eight hours in advance, the global press was full of speculation about the content of *Caritas in Veritate*, in effect building a drumbeat of anticipation for the document's official release.

Three months after the fact, Tosatti said, it's still not clear who sent around that synthesis, or why.

At this stage, he floated a hypothesis: "Perhaps this was a dynamic communications strategy in action," he said. "Perhaps someone in the sacred palaces wanted to prepare a line of interpretation for *Caritas in Veritate* that, for once, wasn't partial or hostile, and decided to act before the bombs went off."

Tosatti's suggestion was that maybe this anonymous initiative was a trial balloon, intended to gauge whether giving the media a heads-up, along with the tools to prepare accurate coverage, would actually work. The

logical corollary is that perhaps next time a major text rolls around, the Vatican will do the same thing in above-board fashion.

That may not sound like rocket science, but we are, after all, talking about an institution that famously thinks in centuries.

One sign of how seriously the Brazilian church takes media relations is that Auxiliary Bishop Dimas Lara Barbosa of Rio de Janeiro, the secretary general of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), spent all day yesterday at the seminar. He's an intriguing guy, whose training was actually in electrical engineering and who still teaches courses on the philosophy of science. He's clearly committed to communications, having recently worked to open a new radio and TV studio for the bishops' conference — not so much to produce their own programming as to make visitors to the conference easily available to mainstream Brazilian radio and TV outlets.

At the end of the day, Lara Barbosa offered a striking invitation to reporters that could, he hinted, improve the relationship between the media and the press: Stop asking us to comment on matters that we obviously don't know anything about.

Noting that there's a popular saying in Brazil, "go complain to a bishop," whenever someone voices a gripe, Lara Barbosa joked that "you can't imagine how true that is" at the bishops' conference office. From the famous Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or landless workers' movement, to the Israeli embassy to Brazil, he said, everybody shows up wanting the bishops to address their pet concern. Likewise, he said, reporters will often phone up seeking comment on everything under the sun, from tax reform to the world economic crisis.

He told a story about the aftermath of a recent plane crash, when a reporter asked Lara Barbosa to offer a word of comfort to the victims' families. That, he said, was entirely appropriate, and he was happy to oblige. Yet at the end of the interview, he said, the reporter tacked on another question: "What is the bishops' plan for air transportation safety in Brazil?"

Flummoxed, Lara Barbosa had to say that offering such a plan would clearly exceed the bishops' competence.

Along the same lines, Lara Barbosa described a recent visit to a local Marian sanctuary near Rio de Janeiro, which also happens to be where Rio's famed Flamengo FC soccer club stops before its matches. While there, the bishop said he was "trapped" into doing a TV interview about why Flamengo hadn't been scoring well; in that case, he said, he took the bait, assuring the reporter that it was "just a phase" and that the team would be fine.

In general, Lara Barbosa's point seemed to be this: The relationship between the church and the press would be improved if both sides focused on the heart of the church's message, rather than trying to drag the church into matters for which it has no special competence, and which are marginal to its real concerns.

The obvious implication is that church officials and spokespersons should also be wary about projecting themselves into those disputes — because, to be honest, it's not always the media's fault.

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