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Pride, ambivalence about Americans in Benedict's Vatican

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tI lunched with a veteran Italian *vaticanista*, meaning a journalist who specializes in the Vatican, this week. At one point, more or less out of the blue, he said to me: ?You know, the American imprint on this pope?s curia is impressive.?

t(The Italian word he used was *impressionante*, which, if anything, is perhaps a bit stronger than ?impressive,? suggesting something truly remarkable.)

tHe proceeded to tick off examples: Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican?s powerful doctrinal office; Cardinal Francis Stafford and Archbishop Raymond Burke, who headed two of the three Vatican courts (Stafford just resigned in June); and Archbishop James Harvey, still the prefect of the Papal Household. (Harvey was appointed to that position by John Paul II in 1998.)

In addition, the Americans are the only national bloc other than the Italians to have at least one official working in virtually every Vatican office.

tThe most recent entry on the list, also cited by my *vaticanista* friend, is Monsignor Peter Wells, who was appointed over the summer as the *assessore*, or ?assessor,? in the Secretariat of State. The move makes Wells, 46, the highest-ranking American in the Secretariat since Harvey, who held the assessor?s position briefly before being named to his current post.

The Secretariat of State is widely considered the most important office in the Vatican in the day-to-day governance of the church, and also in terms of crafting the Vatican?s foreign policy positions. Italians sometimes talk about its ?pentarchy? of key leadership roles:

?tCardinal-Secretary;
?t*Sostituto*, or ?substitute,? who heads the section responsible for day-to-day church governance;
?tSecretary for relations with states, often called the Vatican?s foreign minister, who heads the section dealing with international relations;
?tAssessor, who reports to the substitute;
?tUnder-secretary for relations with states.

In a nutshell, Wells? appointment to one of those jobs means another American in a high place.

Wells was ordained in 1991 after studies at St. Meinrad Seminary in Indiana, the North American College and the Gregorian University in Rome, and the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family. He began working in the ?first section? of the Secretariat of State, responsible for ordinary church governance, in 2002.

During the past seven years, Wells has had a number of important assignments, including preparation for Pope Benedict XVI?s April 2008 trip to the United States as well as his visit last May to Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Jordan. When U.S. President Barack Obama met the pope in July, Wells was one of only two other people in the room, offering translation help when needed. Almost universally, Wells is seen as a gracious, astute, and hard-working official.

If nothing else, the striking American presence in today?s Roman Curia proves that things have come a long way from the days of Pope Leo XIII a century ago, when fears of a rambunctious Protestant-influenced Catholic church in the States led to fears of a heresy dubbed ?Americanism.?

That?s obviously a point of pride, but it may also have a more ambivalent side worth pondering.

Over the centuries, Italians in the Vatican have sometimes struggled to keep their distance from the affairs of the local church, letting the country?s bishops do their job. (Some would say that tradition is alive and well under the current Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone.)

Since the Vatican is actually in Italy, that?s a far greater temptation for Italians than for Americans, whose local church is an ocean away. Nonetheless, the Americans in Rome, even though they now carry responsibility for the universal church, can?t help keeping a special eye on things back home. Every now and then, there?s probably a tug to cross the line from observation to interference.

Many Italians, on the basis of their long historical experience, are quietly issuing this bit of advice to their American friends: The more Americans there are in senior Vatican positions, the greater the need for clarity about roles and lines of authority back home.

Whatever one makes of that, it?s probably a caution worth considering.

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