NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The pope has become an Italian story

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 2, 2009 NCR Today

Rome -- At one point during Pope Benedict XVI's trip to the Czech Republic last weekend, I strolled across the press center in the Prague Hilton. Taking in the conversations floating through the air, and gazing at the people in the room, I was struck by this insight: The pope has once again become largely an Italian story.

Pope John Paul II was a global newsmaker, and the press corps that followed him was strikingly international. These days, the non-Italians who regularly travel with the pope have dwindled to the media equivalent of a remnant church. On this trip, there was no one from *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, or CNN (unless you count me, but my phone never rang), all of whom used to be regulars. Fox was on the papal plane, but only because their Rome correspondent is invested in the Vatican story; if he weren't around, it's a good bet Fox wouldn't be in the mix either.

To be sure, those agencies have a presence in Prague, so it's not like they blew off the story. But once upon a time, all would have had a correspondent moving with the papal party and filing daily coverage. At that level, the American presence boiled down to the Associated Press, a producer from ABC, and the Catholic News Service. (I made the trip, but not on the plane.)

Probably the lone thing that people who get their news from American TV know about the trip is that at one point a spider crawled across the pope's garments. That clip has become popular on You-Tube, and of course it doesn't require any reporting or analysis to understand.

Two points probably help explain this lack of global interest.

First, Benedict XVI simply isn't the charismatic figure John Paul II was. Second, Benedict has surrounded himself with Italians who sometimes seem more interested in *il bel paese* than the global scene. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State, regularly injects himself into Italian affairs. The best sound-bites from the Holy See usually come, in Italian, from prelates such as Archbishop Salvatore Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, and Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples.

In many ways, this is more a return to historical form than a novelty. Prior to John Paul II, most popes were figures of occasional interest around the world; only in Italy were they everyday headliners. Rather than being an exception, Benedict XVI is more like the norm -- and hence a reminder of just how remarkable John Paul actually was.

Nonetheless, this reversion to the papacy as essentially an Italian news beat carries two dangers.

First, it tempts Italians to interpret almost everything the pope says or does as a veiled commentary on Italian affairs. A comic moment in the Czech Republic came near the end, when Benedict XVI made a generic reference to the need for public officials to respect moral values. That triggered a debate among Italian correspondents about whether this was a criticism of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who celebrated

his 73rd birthday this week. Berlusconi's alleged escapades with young courtesans fueled a juicy bit of summer theater here.

The second risk, more relevant for people outside Italy, is that international understanding of the papacy is ever more dependent upon Italian coverage. As I've said before, depending upon the Italians is a dangerous proposition.

To be sure, Italian journalism has its strengths. It's more art than craft, so correspondents are encouraged to bring their personalities into the coverage. That often makes their essays provocative and highly original. A concern for factual accuracy, however, does not figure prominently among its virtues. Sometimes speculation or hypotheses run on the news pages, without much indication that they're not to be taken seriously.

Of course, Italians know all that, and they're highly sophisticated about reading between the lines. When this speculation is translated into other languages and taken as real news, however, it can cause a great deal of mischief -- especially, perhaps, in Anglo-Saxon cultures, where we're still at least somewhat inclined to assume that what appears on the news pages is factually true.

If the Italian near-monopoly on Vatican coverage gains strength, therefore, more and more the rule for understanding news about the pope will have to be *caveat lector*: "Let the reader beware."

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