

Round up of a week in Rome

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 12, 2010 All Things Catholic

Lessons from a Vatican soap opera, Irish sex abuse summit looms, and a conversation with the pope's liturgist

Married couples who are at one another's throats sometimes try to explain to a friend or a counselor what they're fighting about, only to discover they don't really understand it themselves. That's a bit what it's like trying to narrate the Vatican scandal that erupted this week for anyone outside Italy, because it's an exquisitely local story that even insiders struggle to grasp.

The scandal is known as the *caso Boffo*, or the "Boffo case," in reference to Dino Boffo, who resigned over the summer as the editor of *L'Avvenire*, the newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference, amid a still-debated personal scandal. As the storyline has mushroomed, it's evoked images of occult maneuvers, palace coups, and behind-the-scenes Vatican power struggles worthy of a Dan Brown potboiler. A banner headline in one Italian newspaper on Wednesday captured the mood: "Soap Opera in the Vatican." (To add insult to injury, the subhead read, "They deny everything, but no one believes it.")

I'm in Rome this week, and I wish I could say that I saw the clouds gathering and came to watch the storm break. In truth, however, it just so happened that I've been on hand to witness the latest Vatican public relations crisis, one Italians may well remember alongside earlier meltdowns such as the Regensburg controversy in September 2006 and the affair pivoting on a Holocaust-denying traditionalist bishop in January 2009.

Here's a tick-tock of what's happened.

In early September, Boffo resigned after a secular newspaper published charges that he had made harassing phone calls to the wife of a man with whom he supposedly had a homosexual affair. That paper is owned by the brother of Italy's conservative Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, and its report was widely seen as payback for Boffo's decision a few months earlier to publish a few letters critical of Berlusconi's alleged taste for young call girls, breaking what had been an informal silence among the Italian bishops. While Boffo admitted being fined for the phone calls, it turns out that a purported legal document at the heart of the "scoop," which suggested the gay angle, was a fake. The editor of the secular paper eventually admitted as much, while insisting the document came from an "authoritative source in the Catholic world."

Ever since, speculation has swirled about who created the fake, who leaked it, and why. Since late January, Italian papers have been full of reports that the ultimate source of the attack on Boffo was the pope's right-hand man, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, and that Gian Maria Vian, the editor of *L'Osservatore Romano*, was responsible for putting the fake document together.

Conventional wisdom is that at the root of things are tensions between two groups within Italian Catholicism, one centered on Bertone and another on the former president of the Italian bishops' conference, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, under whose patronage Boffo got his job. That rivalry, in turn, is linked to a supposed tug-of-war between the Vatican's Secretariat of State and the Italian bishops over who speaks for the church in Italian

politics and civil society.

On Wednesday, the Vatican released a blistering declaration insisting that neither Bertone nor Vian had anything to do with the leaks, and complaining of "a campaign of defamation against the Holy See which also involves the Roman Pontiff." The declaration asserted that Pope Benedict XVI has been kept informed, that he has "full confidence" in his aides, and that he deplors these "unjust and injurious attacks."

At one level, all this could be seen as an object lesson in irresponsible journalism. In the avalanche of Italian press coverage over the last three weeks, one will look almost in vain for a single named source. As incredible as it seems, the full court press has somehow managed to leave all the basic factual questions hanging: What, if anything, did Boffo actually do? Who put together the fake document? Who leaked it? Why? Despite saturation coverage, we just don't know.

Senior Vatican officials have hinted, and in some cases openly asserted, that anti-clericalism and an animus against the church lurk in the background of the media's willingness to amplify what Wednesday's statement called "the most incredible hypotheses."

On the side of the Vatican, however, there are nevertheless two lessons to be learned from Boffo case, which can't simply be written off as axe-grinding by the press. In a nutshell, the Boffo case illustrates both a problem of management and a problem of communications -- the former reflected in the failure to avert the crisis in the first place, the latter in a failure to respond once it broke.

First, it's becoming increasingly clear that in terms of the day-to-day internal management of the Vatican, nobody's really in charge. In principle, the pope runs the show, but Benedict XVI has made it clear that his priority is his own writing and teaching, preferring to lead by example rather than edict. While Bertone obviously has the pope's support, his track record as an administrator is uneven. No one seems to be in a position to prevent the normal behind-the-scenes tensions that percolate in any bureaucracy from bursting into full public view, thereby creating impressions of chaos.

Ironically, some of the cardinals who voted for Joseph Ratzinger in the conclave of April 2005 believed they were electing someone to remedy what was perceived as inattention to internal governance during the long papacy of John Paul II. Today, however, many observers believe that while Benedict XVI will be remembered as a great teaching pope and a deeply spiritual figure, his legacy as a governor will be mixed.

Second, it's also clear that the long-awaited "great leap forward" in the Vatican's aptitude for public relations has still not arrived. The unanswered questions in the Boffo case were left to fester since last summer, with no internal investigation and no public comment. When the crisis broke in late January, the Vatican had no clear communications strategy. As recently as Monday, a senior Vatican official told *Corriere della Sera*, essentially *The New York Times* of Italy, that there would be no comment, yet less than 48 hours later the Secretariat of State issued its blockbuster statement.

As several Italian news outlets have observed, a full 18 days lapsed from the explosion of the crisis to any Vatican reaction. The logic for the long silence was apparently to stay out of the fray unless it touched the pope himself. That corner was turned earlier this week, when an Italian media outlet reported that Benedict XVI had been given only a "sanitized" version of the Vatican's daily press digest, with the most explosive stories about Boffo removed. The suggestion was that the pope was out of touch, and that perception (which Vatican sources have vigorously denied) was apparently enough to persuade them to speak out.

Whatever the internal reasoning, the result is that from a PR point of view, the Vatican still seems to be defusing bombs well after they've already gone off.

Until and unless these problems of management and communications are addressed, all one can do is wait until the next crisis erupts -- and, of course, there's no guarantee the next cause célèbre will be confined to Italy.

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Next week's big Vatican story is likely to be the summit between the bishops of Ireland and senior Vatican officials, including Pope Benedict XVI, to discuss the crisis that has gripped Ireland in the wake of the recent "Murphy Report" on sexual abuse of minors in the Dublin archdiocese.

This is the first time a pope has convened such an emergency gathering to discuss a sex abuse crisis in a given country since John Paul II called the American cardinals and officers of the U.S. bishops' conference to Rome in April 2002.

Benedict XVI anticipated what is likely to be one element of his message during the summit in a speech earlier this week to the Pontifical Council for the Family. "The church over the centuries ... has promoted the protection of the rights and dignity of minors," he said. "Unfortunately, in several cases some of its members, acting against this commitment, have violated these rights, a behavior the church will never fail to deplore and condemn."

The summit is to take place Monday and Tuesday, Feb. 15-16, with two working sessions on Monday and one on Tuesday. Those meetings are set to take place inside the Apostolic Palace, with 24 Irish bishops and a host of top Vatican officials, reportedly including Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops; Cardinal Claudio Hummes, prefect of the Congregation for Clergy; and Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect of the Congregation for Religious.

It's not clear at the moment whether Benedict XVI will be present for all three sessions, but he's expected to participate in a good chunk of the meeting. The pope has already announced plans to issue a pastoral letter to the church in Ireland, although sources said that the letter will probably be delayed so that the pope can incorporate whatever he gleans from the summit.

In terms of topics of conversation, most observers expect at least two matters to figure prominently:

- What to do about bishops identified in the Murphy Report as culpable for failing to react appropriately when allegations of abuse first surfaced. Two Dublin auxiliary bishops cited in the report, Eamonn Walsh and Raymond Field, have offered to resign and reportedly will not be attending the summit. On the other hand, Bishop Martin Drennan of Galway, also named in the report, has resisted calls to step down and is expected to be in Rome.
- The possibility of a broad reorganization of the church in Ireland, as suggested recently by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin.

Martin and Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh are expected to hold a press conference on Tuesday in Rome after the summit concludes.

Church watchers in Ireland will be following the event closely, looking among other things for some hint of Vatican reaction to Martin's handling of the crisis. Since the Murphy Report appeared, he has taken a tough public stand in favor of reform. *The Irish Catholic*, a national Catholic newspaper, has reported that during a recent meeting of priests in Dublin, some criticized Martin as "divisive" for openly calling on other bishops to step down. Other observers, however, say that Martin's aggressive public reaction has been one of the few bright spots for the Irish church in an otherwise bleak period.

As it happens, a reminder of the global nature of the sex abuse crisis has erupted just on the cusp of the Irish summit. German media outlets have carried accounts in recent days of a mounting scandal centered on a Jesuit-run school in Berlin, Canisius College, where several former students have come forward to allege abuse at the hands of at least two priests between 1975 and 1983. In the wake of those allegations, the German publication *Der Spiegel* conducted a survey of dioceses in the country, finding that at least 94 priests and members of the laity in Germany are suspected or have been suspected of abusing scores of children and adolescents since 1995.

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Msgr. Guido Marini, Benedict XVI's Master of Pontifical Liturgical Celebrations, is one of those Vatican figures who normally operate in the shadows. He's the guy who organizes the Masses and other liturgical events over which the pope presides, so he generally attracts notice only when he happens to be standing near his boss when the TV cameras light up.

Marini took a big step into the spotlight back in January, however, when he gave a speech to a meeting of English-speaking priests in Rome, in which he advocated a liturgical "reform of the reform." Those comments unleashed a wave of speculation in the blogosphere and in liturgical circles about a possible new overhaul of Catholic worship under Benedict XVI, which critics would read as "rolling back the clock" on reforms associated with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Marini sat down for an exclusive interview with *NCR* in his Vatican office on Feb. 9, to explain what he had in mind by a "reform of the reform."

In a nutshell, Marini's message was that under Benedict XVI, the winds are clearly blowing in a more traditional direction, but anyone expecting a dramatic lurch one way or the other is likely to be disappointed -- this pope prefers to operate by "proposing," Marini said, rather than "imposing."

Following are three excerpts from the interview with Marini. More of the interview will be posted to NCRonline.org [1] later. (Marini spoke in Italian, and was given an opportunity to review the English translation of his remarks.)

Allen: What did you have in mind on January 6 when you talked about a "reform of the reform"?

Marini: To tell the truth, I didn't use this expression as something of my own, but as a phrase used by several others for many years, including, of course, the former Cardinal Ratzinger. I didn't want to get into the details of what various people might mean by the expression, because there are different ways of understanding it. I believe that the best way, the most correct way, to understand the expression is certainly not to reject the reforms determined by the Second Vatican Council. Rather, it's to take another step forward in the comprehension and experience of an authentic liturgical spirit, carrying together the inheritance of our tradition with the reform that the council accomplished, in a spirit of development in continuity.

Allen: Of course, the former Cardinal Ratzinger also once warned against new upheavals in the liturgy, saying that we need a period of stability. Do you agree?

Marini: Yes, yes ? I'm fully in agreement! I don't believe that the liturgy of the church needs any radical changes or distortions, in part because it's not in the logic of this spirit of development in continuity. I believe instead that it's a matter of consolidating what already exists, in a more

authentic way, according to the true mind of the church.

Allen: There is no "rollback" on Vatican II?

Marini: Of course not. A 'rollback' wouldn't make sense, because it's not how the life of the church works. The life of the church moves forward in time, always developing but without losing anything from its life of either the past or the present.

Keep your eyes on this Web site for a story about the "reform of the reform" and more of my interview with Marini will be posted.

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This has been a busy week in Rome, with conferences organized by three different pontifical councils: the Council for the Family, the Council for Health Care Workers, and the Council for Promoting Christian Unity. There's also the normal scuttlebutt in the air about important Vatican appointments expected sometime in 2010, as well as the prospect of a consistory sometime later in the year for the creation of new cardinals.

Here's a run-down of reports I filed throughout the week:

<http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/dont-count-third-world-bail-out-ecumenism-anglican-says>

<http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/prelate-mind-ratzinger-and-heart-roncalli>

<http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/unusual-vatican-event-marks-kaspers-not-quite-swan-song>

<http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/talk-rome-turns-new-cardinals-2010>

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