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A Vatican lion who defied conservative/liberal labels

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 3, 2010 NCR Today

Generally speaking, the Vatican is an environment that doesn't exactly encourage individuality. Officials typically move in the shadows, subjecting their own styles and passions to the corporate interests of the Holy See. When you find a personality that shines through even here, therefore, you know you?ve got a live wire.

For the last decade, that?s unquestionably been the case with Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, who stepped down on Wednesday as Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, a position he had held since November 2001.

Marchetto is a fascinating guy for many reasons, but here?s my favorite: He?s a living embodiment of the point that whether the Catholic church seems ?liberal? or ?conservative? often depends on what question you?re asking.

Prior to taking up his Vatican gig, Marchetto was a hero to many conservatives as the author of a history of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) that challenged progressive interpretations of Vatican II. Over the last decade, however, Marchetto has often been a thorn in the side of the same crowd, and a hero to peace-and-justice liberals, because of his outspoken defense of immigrant rights.

Most recently, Marchetto bitterly criticized the expulsions of hundreds of Roma people by the French government of Nicolas Sarkozy, insisting that guilt is always individual, never collective, and that ?one cannot take an entire group of people and kick them out.?

Those comments earned Marchetto the nickname ?the Gypsy Bishop.?

t(As a footnote, Marchetto also told a French news agency on August 26 that ?when there are expulsions and suffering, I can?t take any pleasure in the suffering of these people, in particular when it?s a case of weak and poor people who are persecuted, who are victims of a ?holocaust.?? Italian newspapers played that up as the Vatican comparing the French crackdown on Gypsies to the Holocaust, which brought criticism from around the world, including from Holocaust survivor Elie Weisel. Afterwards, Marchetto insisted that?s not what he meant ? his point, he said, was that persecution of any sort has to be of concern.)

tThat was hardly his first rodeo in terms of kicking up a media storm.

Back in 2009, Marchetto criticized the Italian government under conservative Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi for a deal with Libya that allows the Italian navy to intercept migrants at sea and ship them back to Tripoli,

which drew all sorts of complaints from conservative politicians and praise from the United Nations? agency for refugees.

In the same year he came out swinging against a new immigration law in Italy, calling criminalization of clandestine movement the law?s ?original sin.? On that occasion, the Vatican felt forced to clarify that it hadn?t taken an official position on the measure.

tFor sure, Marchetto has always has a gift for sound-bites.

When the 2006 World Cup took place in Germany, Marchetto issued a warning that the event might generate a boom in human trafficking for prostitution, telling reporters: ?To use the language of soccer, I believe some ?red cards? need to be assigned to this industry, to its clients and to the public authorities who host the event.?

In 2007, Marchetto again garnered headlines around the world when he charged that homelessness is a ?global pandemic? which deserves the same sort of aggressive response as HIV/AIDS.

When word of Marchetto?s resignation began to make the rounds in Rome, some took it as punishment for being a ?loose cannon,? with his comments on the French expulsions representing the straw that broke the camel?s back. Marchetto, however, said his resignation was in the works a year ago, well before the current contretemps broke out. He?s taking advantage, he said, of a traditional prerogative of papal nuncios to resign at 70 rather than the usual age of 75. (At earlier points in his career, Marchetto served as Apostolic Nuncio to Madagascar and Mauritius, and to Tanzania.)

tPrivately, Marchetto has a reputation as hard-charging and tough, which could make him an ambivalent figure, especially for those who worked under him. Yet he was also a favorite not only among reporters, but also diplomats, politicians, activists, scholars, and other Vatican outsiders, for whom he always had an ?open door? policy.

tMarchetto told reporters this week that he plans now to return to his scholarly work on Vatican II, ?a subject I love and that?s so important for the church.?

tThe next time the world hears from Marchetto, therefore, he may seem to have returned to his ?conservative? roots, having passed for the better part of a decade as a social justice ?liberal? ? all the while remaining the same guy.

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