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

In defense of L'Osservatore Romano

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 24, 2010 All Things Catholic

[Note: "All Things Catholic" is being published early this week, ahead of the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States.]

Pope Benedict XVI?s surprising comments on condoms in his new book-length interview with German journalist Peter Seewald, titled *Light of the World*, obviously has been the big Vatican story this week. I wrote a piece for the BBC analyzing what the pope said and didn?t say, which can be found here: Why condom comments are no earthquake in Catholic teaching [1]. I?ve also laid out other interesting elements in the book in a piece for NCR: Pope on condoms, sex abuse, resignation ... and movie nights [2]

Here, I?ll restrict myself to the hope that when the furor over condoms dies down, people will actually read the whole book. As always, Benedict XVI offers a fascinating diagnosis of the situation facing the church and the wider world. One may disagree with this or that point (and Benedict openly concedes that a pope?s private opinions can be wrong), but his assessments are well worth pondering.

In the meantime, a fascinating subplot has emerged in the form of fierce intra-Catholic blowback against *L?Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, which published a set of extracts from the book on Saturday night, including an edited version of Benedict?s comments on condoms. That scoop came ahead of an embargo imposed on other publications, catching the world?s media off-guard and triggering a cycle of sensational and often misleading coverage. It?s already being touted as the latest Vatican communications debacle, and some critics are insisting that heads must roll.

To put my cards on the table, I write to offer a few words in defense of *L?Osservatore Romano* and its editor, Italian layman Gian Maria Vian.

First, here?s a sampling of what critics are saying.

- Veteran Italian Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli provocatively called *L?Osservatore*?s scoop a ?contraceptive on the consistory,? arguing that the tidal wave of media interest in the book unleashed Saturday night utterly overshadowed what was supposed to be the big news event on Sunday, Nov. 21, when Benedict XVI inducted 24 new members into the College of Cardinals. Tornielli also complained that *L?Osservatore* presented the pope?s words on condoms out of context and without any explanation.
- American Catholic writer Phil Lawler suggested that *L?Osservatore* is guilty of a ?truly disastrous gaffe,? charging that the paper ?violated the embargo? and published the comments on condoms ?prematurely and outside their proper context.? Lawler complained that *L?Osservatore* in recent months has repeatedly embarrassed the Vatican with ?puerile articles gushing about the merits of Michael Jackson, the Beatles, and The Simpsons.? This episode, he said, is even worse, provoking misinformation on a critically important issue. In consequence, Lawler said, Vian should be asked to resign.
- Noted American canon lawyer Edward Peters said that as the official release date for the book on Nov. 23 approached, writers, speakers and resource persons had been lined up in the United States and in other nations to provide context and background. Those plans were blown out of the water, he said, by *L?Osservatore*

?s preemptive strike. ?If this media fiasco is not enough to bring sweeping changes to [*L?Osservatore*],? Peters wrote, ?then I don?t know what ever will.?

Such severe judgments from well-informed people deserve to be taken seriously, so let me stipulate a key point in the indictment: Presentation of the pope?s words on condoms could have been, and should have been, much better handled. At a minimum, it would have been helpful to call reporters in for a background session with Vatican officials and moral theologians to work through the language on condoms in advance (as well as other potentially headline-grabbing points, such as Benedict?s comments on Pius XII and on papal resignation), rather than scrambling after the fact.

Yet before demanding a purge at *L?Osservatore*, several other points ought to be made.

First, as a purely factual matter, the Vatican paper did not ?violate? an embargo. It simply got a better deal from the publisher, in this case the Vatican Publishing House.

Several media outlets around the world were given permission to publish extracts from the book on Sunday, but had to restrict themselves to chapters one, six and seventeen, which don?t contain any major news flashes. *L?Osservatore*, because of its special status, was allowed to comb through the entire manuscript, and obviously made some journalistically sound judgments about which sections would be of widest public interest, including the lines on condoms (which come from chapter two). The paper waited until Sunday to run the extracts, though because *L?Osservatore* is always released the evening before its publication date, it actually came out Saturday night.

In other words, *L?Osservatore* played by the rules it was given. (If you want to be mad at somebody over the timing, try the Vatican Publishing House.) Frankly, some of the grumbling about a ?violation? of an embargo may be no more than raw journalistic envy at getting beat to the punch.

Second, calling for Vian?s head on a platter ignores the great leap forward he?s brought to *L?Osservatore* since his appointment as editor-in-chief in October 2007.

Visually, he?s introduced color and a better use of graphics. In terms of content, he?s added timely newsmaker interviews, more ecumenical and inter-religious coverage, greater attention to local Catholic news from around the world, harder-hitting editorials and commentary, and a livelier focus on culture and the arts ? including, famously, pop culture. (That may not be everyone?s taste, but it works for some. After one of my recent speaking gigs, I was witness to a lively argument between an elderly Catholic woman who thought the piece on ?The Simpsons? was a disgrace, and a youth minister who said it stimulated one of the best discussions in her CCD classes she?s ever had.)

As a result, *L?Osservatore* today feels much more like a real world-class newspaper ? it takes chances, raises eyebrows and stirs tongues. It?s become a must-read, with appeal to literate Catholics everywhere, well beyond the narrow circle of professional Vaticanologists. The price of taking chances, of course, is that sometimes the paper misses the mark or goes off half-cocked, but would anyone seriously prefer a return to the old days of a Roman version of *Pravda*?

Third, the notion that *L?Osservatore* pre-empted what would otherwise have been wide international attention to the Nov. 21 consistory is a fantasy.

Media interest in a consistory comes, if at all, a full month in advance, with the announcement of the names of the new cardinals. The actual event in Rome is purely ceremonial, and while it may generate some color pieces in the hometown papers of the new cardinals, the idea that it would have been a global media phenomenon if not for *L?Osservatore*?s scoop is just ridiculous.

This time around, the only real news out of the consistory was the business meeting of the cardinals on Nov. 19, where the sexual abuse crisis was on the agenda ? and nothing *L?Osservatore* did had any effect on that story, since it had a full 24 hours to play out.

Fourth, no matter how well presented the pope?s words on condoms might have been, some degree of distortion was probably inevitable.

My experience is that anytime you put the words ?pope,? ?condoms,? and ?AIDS? into the same sentence, many secular news outlets will go nuts no matter what the context might be. Likewise the blogosphere probably would have erupted anyway, and aggressive pro-choice and pro-life groups would still have rushed to supply their own spin ? the former hyping the pope?s words beyond all recognition, and the latter minimizing them into nothingness.

In other words, a communications debacle is sometimes only partly the fault of the communicator. The audience also bears responsibility for listening carefully and thinking patiently, and it?s not clear *L?Osservatore* has much power to force the world to be more careful and/or patient.

Fifth, let?s face facts: Part of the current blowback is coming from conservatives who have never forgiven *L?Osservatore Romano* for its relatively friendly assessment of U.S. President Barack Obama in the wake of his election, including Vian?s famous early 2009 remark that Obama is not a ?pro-abortion president.?

One can certainly disagree with that view, or point out that *L?Osservatore*?s editorial line was exploited by political forces in America who wanted to undercut the strong pro-life positions of the U.S. bishops. But in the interests of keeping the record straight, it has to be said that the anti-*L?Osservatore* anger unleashed this week isn?t just about pious concern that the paper has caused Benedict?s book to be misunderstood; it?s also about settling old political and ideological scores.

Sixth, Vian is a longtime friend of the Vatican?s Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who hand-picked Vian for the job at *L?Osservatore*. Bertone?s record as an administrator over the last five years is certainly open to serious debate, but like any big-wig, he?s also got people who would love to wound him for political and personal motives. One good way to do so is by discrediting his most visible appointment.

Some of the finger-pointing at Vian, especially in Italy, thus may partly be a means of scoring points against Bertone. Anyone who watched the notorious ?Boffo case? unfold in Italy last year, in which Bertone was rumored to have smeared the reputation of an Italian Catholic journalist through Vian (a claim both have repeatedly denied), knows this is not an entirely fantastic scenario.

None of this means *L?Osservatore* Romano is blameless for the frenzy over condoms, some of which could have been avoided if the presentation had been more artfully handled. It?s also unfair, however, to lay responsibility for that breakdown entirely at the paper?s doorstep. The Vatican Publishing House, or for that matter the pope himself, could have insisted on attaching whatever context they wanted to the extracts as a condition of giving the paper permission to run them. It?s not as if *L?Osservatore* was in a position to refuse.

More basically, honesty demands recognizing that mixed in with legitimate criticism of Vian and *L?Osservatore* are a variety of other forces, including jealousy, politics, and dated expectations of how the Vatican paper ought to behave. It would be tragic if accumulated frustrations over Vatican communications fell primarily upon what has heretofore been one of the few bright spots on that landscape.

Before heads are fitted on pikes, therefore, we probably ought to be sure it?s for the right reasons.

[John Allen is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

Source URL (retrieved on *03/10/2014 - 09:12*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/defense-losservatore-romano

Links:
[1] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11813319
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/21373