

Naples cardinal illustrated cultural gap on accountability

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 6, 2010 NCR Today

Rome -- With the Dec. 2 death of retired Cardinal Michele Giordano of Naples -- the highest-ranking prelate ever to face criminal prosecution in Italy -- the Catholic world has lost not only a prince of the church, but perhaps its best example of the "cultural gap" between the Vatican and Main Street USA when it comes to the vexed matter of accountability for bishops.

In a thumbnail: In the late 1990s, Giordano was indicted for fraud and went through a full criminal trial (though he never set foot in court) in a case arising from a real estate scam orchestrated by his brother, causing massive embarrassment for the Italian church and the Vatican.

The case generated church-state tensions when police insisted on examining confidential documents of the Naples archdiocese, in addition to financial records that Giordano provided. The Vatican also protested that Italian investigators had not informed them that Giordano was a target of investigation, a notice they should have given under the terms of the concordat between the Holy See and Italy.

At one stage, prosecutors revealed that they had tapped Giordano's phone, which led the astonished cardinal to complain to the press: "I could have been talking to the pope!"

Although Giordano was acquitted in 2000, the outcome was not exactly a vindication. Essentially, the court bought Giordano's defense that he was guilty of naiveté and sloppy administration, not criminal intent.

Giordano found himself in the dock once again in 2002, facing criminal charges in another real estate case. This time he was actually found guilty and sentenced to four months in prison and a fine, though that verdict was suspended and eventually overturned on appeal.

Giordano finally retired in 2006, and was replaced in Naples by Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe -- who, it turns out, is now facing some tough questions about his own financial wheeling and dealing while serving as prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples from 2001-2006.

Seen through American eyes, the obvious question raised by the Giordano story is the following: Why wasn't he fired?

At every stage of the drama -- when it was first revealed that Giordano was the target of a criminal probe, when he was indicted, when that first trial neared a verdict, when he was charged again two years later -- speculation swirled that the Vatican would yank him out of Naples in order to spare the church the embarrassment.

One version of those rumors had Giordano heading off to a monastery, another that he would be brought to Vatican City and given a job where the Italian civil authorities could not reach him.

In the end, however, Giordano remained in place even after he was sentenced in 2002, raising at least the hypothetical possibility that a sitting cardinal could have been subjected to the indignity of some kind of house

arrest.

The typical American take-away is that the Giordano saga illustrates a lack of accountability at senior levels of the church, since a cardinal who obviously made some dubious choices never lost his job.

In the Vatican, however, the perspective was different. I remember talking to senior officials in both the Congregation for Bishops and the Secretariat of State throughout the Giordano drama, and while some suspected Giordano might be the victim of an anti-clerical vendetta, even those who regarded him as guilty weren't interested in coming to his rescue. The message was that he's going to have to stay put and clean up his own mess.

In other words, the Vatican version of accountability was to allow Giordano to stew in his own juices, rather than getting him off the hook by arranging a face-saving resignation.

Not only was that a tactical calculation to deny Giordano a soft landing, but it also reflects the official theology of the episcopal office. In theory, a bishop is not supposed to be like a CEO or a sports coach, who gets fired for poor performance. He's more comparable to the father of a family, and policy-makers stepped in this "pater familias" view of the bishops' role would say that the right course of action when times get tough is not to walk away, but to "man up" and make things right.

Obviously one can debate the wisdom of that perspective, and there can be times when the good of the diocesan family requires that the bishop hit the road - the case of Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston is perhaps the best-known recent example.

Nonetheless, the Giordano story illustrates a key insight into Vatican psychology, one that sometimes is obscured by differing cultural assumptions. When the Vatican refuses to sack a bishop, it's not always about the absence of accountability, but rather a different view of what holding him accountable means.

Knowing that will not make very real debates over accountability disappear, but it might at least avoid the pitfall of mistaken assumptions about motives on either side of the equation.

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