

Thoughts from Rome: the Vatican newspaper, religious life

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 10, 2010 All Things Catholic

Early December in Rome is usually a period of relative calm, as things begin to slow down ahead of the Christmas holidays. That makes it a good moment to take stock, looking back to the major turning points of the past year and ahead to things to come.

Two conversations I've had this week illustrate that stock-taking mood.

One was with Giovanni Maria Vian, editor in chief of *L'Osservatore Romano*, looking back at the recent contretemps over presentation of the pope's book-length interview with German journalist Peter Seewald, and ahead to the 150th anniversary of the Vatican newspaper next year. The other came with Archbishop Joseph Tobin, an American who since September has served as Secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, about issues facing religious life and the internal culture of the Vatican itself.

Excerpts from both interviews appear below. I sat down with Tobin on Dec. 6, and Vian on Dec. 9.

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To illustrate that the more things change, the more they stay the same, it's worth recalling that *L'Osservatore Romano* was born 150 years ago amid the Vatican crisis of its day: the collapse of the Papal States. When Rome fell nine years after the paper was born, *L'Osservatore* became the voice of popes who declared themselves "prisoners of the Vatican."

Over the years, *L'Osservatore Romano* has played a unique dual role -- both a vehicle for the Vatican to get its message out, but also a forum for serious journalistic analysis and commentary. During the Fascist era, for example, *L'Osservatore* was sometimes the only paper in Italy not under the thumb of the Mussolini regime, and it was widely read as the only reliable source of insight about what was really going on.

In some ways, the tension between being a house organ and a world-class newspaper has become even more prominent since Vian took charge in October 2007. By adding timely interviews and columns, beefed-up global news coverage, and thoughtful pieces on culture and the arts, Vian has turned *L'Osservatore* into a must-read. Critics, however, say the price of Vian's revolution is that his livelier, more unpredictable *L'Osservatore* sometimes sows confusion about the official positions of the Vatican or the Catholic Church.

The roll-out of Benedict XVI's recent book-length interview with German journalist Peter Seewald offers a classic case in point. Critics claim that *L'Osservatore* went off half-cocked by publishing extracts from the book, including the pope's fateful lines on condoms, on Saturday, Nov. 21, ahead of the embargo established for other media outlets. They also say the pope's words were published out of context, in way that seemed calculated for sensational impact rather than understanding. Vian denies both charges.

To mark the paper's 150th anniversary, a new book has been published called *Singolarissimo Giornale* ("Very

Unique Newspaper?), a title which comes from a phrase once used by Pope Paul VI to describe *L'Osservatore Romano*. The book collects essays from a number of historians and journalists commenting on the Vatican paper's story over the last 150 years.

I sat down with Vian yesterday in the offices of *L'Osservatore Romano* to discuss the anniversary and the paper's role today -- including the controversy over the pope's book.

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What's the significance of this anniversary?

First of all, it's fairly rare for a newspaper to reach such a milestone. One hundred and fifty years is a long time! Also, the paper has changed a great deal. It was actually born as a private initiative in 1861. At the time, it wasn't official because it didn't belong to the Holy See, and it remained independent even after the fall of Rome to the Italian nationalists.

After 1885, it became the property of the Holy See. Of course, that increased its authoritative status. Papal control grew, and the paper acquired more prestige and fame. It became the expression, the voice -- because Vatican Radio didn't exist at the time -- of a pope who didn't have any other way to make himself heard.

Aside from the details of this history, the story of *L'Osservatore* basically is the story of how the Holy See has engaged modernity, especially the modern world of information and communication. It hasn't been afraid to enter into this new world.

Your status as the Vatican newspaper doesn't mean that the pope, or somebody acting on his behalf, actually reads and approves every word before you publish it.

No, and that's never been how things work. Technically, the only official part of the newspaper is the 'Our Information' column. [Usually published on the front page, 'Our Information' is a brief list of appointments, audiences, and other official papal acts.]

Naturally, *L'Osservatore Romano* is the only newspaper of the Vatican, and so it has a certain authority. However, it's an authority derived from its long history and its capacity to interpret the point of view of the Holy See, the pope, and the Secretariat of State, not from being directly approved. The pope is our 'editor,' in the sense of being the owner of the paper, through the Secretariat of State and the substitute. But we come out every day, and it's just not possible for anyone to approve the content beforehand.

How do you see the role of *L'Osservatore Romano* today?

In a sense it's the role the paper has always had, which is to be, in the words of Paul VI, a lighthouse that gives direction to life. In reality, it's actually a rather small paper, with just a few thousand copies printed every day -- around 13,000 to 15,000, more or less. Of course, you have to add all the editions in the other languages, and the agreements we've worked out with other media agencies to carry versions of the paper.

Because we don't have a massive circulation, sometimes people think we must be an official bulletin published

in Latin, but it's not like that. In truth, *L'Osservatore Romano* is a fairly "lay" newspaper, one that tries to appeal to a "lay" readership.

You're the Vatican newspaper, but you also want to be a timely, provocative paper that appeals to today's media marketplace. Is there a tension between those two goals?

That's the challenge, and it's the same challenge the pope himself faces. Benedict XVI is very much in touch with today's world. He talks about subjects such as death, judgment, Heaven and Hell, as he does in the encyclical *Spe Salvi*, not so much by drawing on authors from the Christian tradition, but figures such as Plato and Aristotle, as well as contemporary philosophers and writers such as Dostoevsky. One of our columnists, Lucetta Scaraffia, actually wrote an essay about the pope titled, "A pope who speaks to everyone."

With a pope like that, his newspaper also has to be capable of talking to everyone. That's what we try to do, within the limits of our abilities and our resources. Believe me, we make mistakes every day. Soon after I arrived, we made a statistical mistake on the number of religious. We said there was a "collapse" in religious life because we read the numbers incorrectly. Of course, we immediately ran a correction. When journalists called me about it, I gave them a sound-bite: "Our newspaper certainly isn't infallible. That's our editor, and even he isn't infallible all the time!"

Was the way you presented the pope's book, and especially his comments on condoms, one of those mistakes?

I don't think so. Because it had already been decided that various media agencies would be able to run material from the book on Sunday morning, we didn't have any choice other than to publish our extracts on Saturday afternoon. [The Sunday edition of *L'Osservatore Romano* is always published Saturday afternoon.]

Some people said we published the extracts without enough context, but in my opinion, if you read the parts we selected, they speak for themselves perfectly clearly. That's also true, by the way, of the famous section on condoms.

Of course, there was confusion about the translation of the word "prostitute," but that wasn't up to us. In fact, I was concerned about the translation on another point, having to do with the Good Friday prayer in the old Latin Mass. The Italian translation was confusing, because it seemed to say the exact opposite of the pope's thinking. What the pope said is that he didn't want a prayer for the conversion of the Jews, but in the Italian text there was a double negative that seemed like an affirmation -- making it sound like the pope wanted such a prayer. I realized the translation was a problem, and I went to the original German text and we corrected it.

In the case of the word "prostitute," we didn't do that, but it wasn't the central point anyway. We weren't interested in creating a scandal.

You weren't looking for a "scoop"?

Absolutely not. That would be ridiculous.

Anyway, the "scoop" was already there, in the advance versions of the text itself. We tried to show fair play with respect to other publications, because aside from a few words on drug abuse, we didn't publish anything from the three chapters of the book which other publications were allowed to use. [Note: Other publications were authorized by the Vatican Publishing House to use material from chapters 1, 6 and 17 on Nov. 21, material which did not include the lines on condoms.] We didn't want to steal material from the other newspapers.

To be clear: You did not violate any "embargo".

Absolutely not.

Looking back, is there a lesson to learn from the controversy over the book?

We already knew that our newspaper is carefully read and carefully followed, especially by specialists ? by colleagues in the news business, by diplomats, and so on. Our readers may not be numerous, but they're influential. But in this case, the important thing wasn't anything *L'Osservatore Romano* said, but the words of the pope himself. I'm not sure anything we might have done would have changed very much.

The fact is that the pope decided to give an interview to a journalist he's known for a long time, a journalist who obviously has his trust, and he's produced a very interesting book. If this episode has helped increase the book's circulation, we can't be anything other than satisfied.

One problem in perceptions of *L'Osservatore Romano* is that most Catholics around the world never actually see the news, interviews, columns, and so on that you provide every day. Probably the only three things most American Catholics know, for example, are that you said something positive about President Obama, you've carried friendly pieces on 'The Simpsons' and Michael Jackson, and that you shot the pope's words on condoms around the world.

Sure, but that doesn't represent the reality. I can admit there are legitimate criticisms to be made of the work we do, both my work as editor-in-chief and that of all our journalists. But, I can promise you that there's no malevolent intent with respect to the pope! It would be like a journalist trying to undercut his own editor or publisher -- that journalist would be fired within the arc of 24 hours.

Wouldn't it help if Catholics around the world could get the content of the newspaper directly, and in real time?

Of course, but the problem is that our resources are limited. Ideally, all the principal articles would be quickly translated into English and other languages and put on line. We're trying to think about that, in cooperation with other communications departments of the Holy See.

It's a serious challenge, and we'll see if this 150th anniversary can help us to achieve a more effective and more rapid presence ? at least, we ought to be translated into English and Spanish. The problem is to find translators of high quality who can work fast. It's a problem of resources, both economic and human, but we're aware of it and we're working on it.

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Archbishop Joseph Tobin, 58, is an American who grew up in Detroit, and who served two terms as superior of the Redemptorist order prior to his appointment as the Vatican's number two official for religious life in August. Earlier this week, I published what Tobin had to say about the visitation of religious women in the United States. That story can be found here: <http://ncronline.org/news/women-religious/vatican-official-speaks-strategy-reconciliation-women-religious>

Here, I'll offer the rest of our conversation.

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One issue that bishops from religious orders have to navigate is how much to play up, or play down, their connection to their order. Some continue to wear their habits, for example, while others don't. How are you managing it?

I'm still learning. Sometimes I wear my habit with a pectoral cross and a skullcap, and occasionally I get a little flack. It's still all fairly new, and I haven't worked out my position on everything. I sometimes think that if I'm ever self-absorbed enough to write my memoirs, this chapter would be titled "Joe's marvelous adventure in bipolarity!"

For people who don't know your office very well, can you describe what you spend most of your time doing?

One would think that it's mostly documents, and to be honest there is a surprising amount of documents. But I think of it a bit like being a parish priest, because in a parish you have to shift gears. You're dealing one moment with a boiler that doesn't work, then you're dealing with a couple in crisis, and then it's somebody who's lost their grandmother. I find in my position that a lot of people just drop in, especially bishops and archbishops and abbots and mothers superior.

What do they want to talk about?

A bishop might drop in to say he's really worried about a convent of contemplative nuns in his diocese, whose average age is 80 and the mother superior is suffering from dementia. He's really concerned about care for the sisters, but he knows he can't interfere. So, what can he do? Another example might be a bishop who wants religious in his diocese. I was talking last week with a bishop who I've known in the past from Burundi, and he would love to have more religious in his diocese. It's a very difficult part of the world.

Usually at least once a week we meet with groups of bishops who are making their ad limina visit, and I find that very important. We get the synopsis of their reports, especially the sections that deal with religious, maybe a week to ten days before the actual visitation. The times that I've chaired the meetings, I find it's enough to welcome them and to say, "What are your concerns?"

Do you find those ad limina meetings useful?

I do, because it gives you a chance to hear how the bishops, at least, perceive things. It also gives you a chance to promote a mutual exchange, because sometimes bishops will have some very severe judgments about religious. I'll ask, "Well, when do you talk to religious?" I like to quote Horace, who says I can't love what I don't know. I tell them that's also true for the religious, who find it much harder to love you as the diocesan bishop if they don't know who you are.

In terms of bishops who have severe judgments about religious, do you find they typically come from a particular part of the world?

I would say they tend to be less present in Asia and Africa. Last week, for example, we had an ad limina visit from the Philippines, and there seems to be more of a spirit of cooperation. There are other countries where there are real serious juxtapositions either between religious and diocesan leaders, or religious and the national conference of bishops. Unfortunately that tends to happen right at the moment when the country needs a united witness, and they're not getting it. I think that's serious.

What kinds of issues create those tensions?

I think there are issues of authority. Sometimes there are accusations that religious want to form a parallel church, or a parallel magisterium. Religious may perceive that bishops are unnecessarily intrusive into the internal affairs of religious orders. Bishops sometimes believe that the religious are contradicting them publicly, or opposing them, on some of the cultural questions, the "culture wars." The conflict between some members of the national conference in the States and the Catholic Health Association would be an example. Where we can, we want to be of help in trying to address those tensions.

Can you spot how the issues facing religious life vary depending upon what part of the world you're in?

Sure. I travelled around the world for 18 years, and now in a sense the world comes to us. If you ask people in Western Europe or North America, the big issues would be the visitation of nuns in America, or the Irish visitation [in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis], or the question of religious involved in sexual abuse. In Africa, there are different issues. One might be the fate of small orders of nuns of diocesan right, which sometimes are just abandoned.

There are also structures in the church that make it very difficult to take a sort of corporate approach to individual problems. One that our dicastery began to deal with a couple years ago, but never followed through on, is the question of monasteries of the contemplative life. A bishop may have legitimate concerns, like the example I gave earlier of the bishop worried about the aging sisters, but he has no authority to get involved. If there's an authority that can step in, I suppose it would be us, but for us to try to do everything from Rome is very unwieldy too. I don't think our dicastery is in a position to be a very good mother to these thousands of monasteries, although they're highly concentrated in two countries, Spain and Italy. I met a couple of weeks ago with a representative of an association of 27 Ursuline convents in Germany, and they have no structure that can deal with the individual problems. There's no forum or central authority.

People turn to us and they say, "What can we do?" I think one of the answers is that our dicastery owes it to the church to build on a reflection that was begun a couple of years ago. One of our meetings had to do with this theme, but everything has kind of been on people's desks since then. I'm hoping we can move it forward, to try to get some practical guidelines to help bishops and religious to deal with these questions.

It's important, because in the kind of situation I'm describing, not only can the contemplatives sometimes not care for themselves, but they may be prey to some really unscrupulous people. Some of these convents have a patrimony of art, or land, or whatever, which some people would love to get their hands on, and they do.

How about the internal culture of the Vatican? Have you discovered anything you didn't know before?

I always suspected that dicasteries don't talk to each other very much, but now being on the inside, I can say it's a challenge. It's especially important if you're trying to offer a united front, or to foster a cooperative effort on a single problem. It's a work in progress ? I don't think cooperation is built into the system.

Another discovery has been the new forms of consecrated life which are emerging. I was fairly familiar with the people I would meet with, like the Dominicans and Jesuits and Franciscans, and the major orders of women religious. These new orders coming into being in France, or in the States, or wherever, weren't so familiar, and it's been interesting to listen to them and to try to understand their own particular intuition.

Can you give an example?

I met a group in the States that I had never heard of, called the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity.

They're down in Texas. They include priests, consecrated woman, and married couples. I met with them a couple of weeks ago, and then I met with the bishop of Corpus Christi, which is where their main American center is. That was new for me.

Last week I met a group of Spanish from the Isle of Majorca, although they told me that they're in 34 countries now, called the Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity. Once again, they would be a mix of consecrated men, consecrated women, and what they would call "consecrated couples." Theologically, that raises interesting questions.

There's growth out there as well as decline?

Absolutely. Last week we considered a Poor Clare monastery in Spain which has a very charismatic abbess, who has 120 young sisters whose average age is 35. That was a new experience!

I have a problem with people who want to say that religious life is over, or that we've surpassed it and a new paradigm has to emerge. You can say religious life has problems, sure, and you should say it "it's obvious, it's the truth. But to say that it's over seems a little arrogant, because that presumes it was our idea to begin with, and that we have a right to declare it dead. I don't think we do.

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As a footnote, there was a brief flurry of speculation late last week about who Tobin's new boss at the Congregation for Religious might be.

Veteran Italian Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli floated the hypothesis that Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodr'guez Maradiaga, 67, might take over from 76-year-old Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, in part because of the precariousness of Rodr'guez's situation in Honduras. (He's received death threats because of his efforts to heal divisions opened up by a 2009 change in government in Honduras denounced by some as a coup.) Moreover, as Tornielli notes, there's presently a shortage of Latin Americans in senior Vatican positions.

Many observers in Rome, however, remain dubious about the prospect of Rodr'guez taking over at the Congregation for Religious.

For one thing, he doesn't have a personal tie to Benedict XVI from the years when the future pope led the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which has become something of a prerequisite for a senior Vatican post, and his profile as a theological moderate isn't necessarily an asset. Moreover, Rodr'guez is a Salesian, and there are already three Salesians heading Vatican offices: Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State; Cardinal Angelo Amato, of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints; and Cardinal Raffaele Farina, of the Vatican Secret Archives.

Even in a time of an obvious "Salesian ascendancy" under Benedict XVI, some believe that Rodr'guez Maradiaga might just be one Salesian too many.

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