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Sex abuse crisis, Vatican PR woes figure in WikiLeaks scoops

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Secret diplomatic cables revealed this morning as part of the WikiLeaks releases confirm that while the Vatican was appalled by revelations of clerical sexual abuse in Ireland in 2009 and 2010, it was also offended by demands that the papal ambassador participate in a government-sponsored probe, seeing it as an insult to the Vatican?s sovereign immunity under international law.

That stance, according to the cable, came off in Ireland as ?pettily procedural? while failing to confront the reality of clerical abuse, and thereby made the crisis worse.

The cables also contain critical diplomatic assessments of Pope Benedict XVI?s recent decision to create new structures to welcome disgruntled Anglicans, as well as the perceived technological illiteracy and communications ineptitude of some senior Vatican officials.

PR woes in the Vatican, according to one cable, have lowered the volume on the pope?s ?moral megaphone.?

Newly disclosed cables also indicate that:

?tThe Vatican has expressed desire to resist the influence of Venezuelan Socialist strongman Hugo Chavez across Latin America;
?tIt agreed to quietly encourage countries to support the Copenhagen accord on climate change, even though the Holy See does not officially take positions on draft agreements;
?tIt hoped that Poland would act as a bulwark against radical secularism within the European Union, especially by ?holding the line? on life and family issues;
?tThen-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger opposed Turkey?s entry into the European Union, but as pope, Benedict XVI has taken an official neutral stance, while continuing to emphasize the importance of Europe?s Christian roots.

While the cables unveiled this morning don?t really contain any surprises about the Vatican itself, they do lift the veil on how American diplomats and their colleagues have viewed various moves by Rome in recent years.

The revelations come mostly in cables from the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See back to the State Department in Washington, often expressing information gleaned from conversations either with church sources or with other diplomats in Rome.

The cables were unveiled in the Dec. 11 issue of the U.K.-based *Guardian* newspaper.

One 2009 cable, titled ?Sex abuse scandal strains Irish-Vatican relations, shakes up Irish church, and poses challenges for the Holy See,? reports on a conversation between Julieta Valls Noyes, the number two official at the U.S. embassy to the Vatican, and her counterparts in the Irish embassy to the Holy See.

Noyes writes that while the Vatican?s first concern was for the victims of abuse, it also felt that requests for its ambassador in Ireland to cooperate with the ?Murphy Commission? probe threatened its sovereignty under international law.

The cable reports that the Vatican?s Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, ultimately wrote to the Irish Embassy to the Holy See to insist that any requests for information should come through proper diplomatic channels.

That stance, Noyes wrote, produced backlash in Ireland: ?Much of the Irish public views the Vatican protests as pettily procedural and failing to confront the real issue of horrific abuse and cover-up by Church officials,? she wrote.

As the Irish situation developed in late 2009 and early 2010, Noyes went on to say, ?the normally cautious Vatican moved with uncharacteristic speed to address the internal church crisis,? pointing to a meeting between Pope Benedict and Irish bishops in February 2010, but she also says that contacts both in Ireland and the Vatican expect the crisis ?to be protracted over several years.?

In another 2009 cable, Noyes describes a conversation with Francis Campbell, the ambassador of the United Kingdom to the Holy See, about the pope?s decision to create new structures, called ?personal ordinariates,? to welcome traditionalist Anglicans upset with liberalizing moves such as the ordination of women and openly gay bishops, and the blessing of same-sex unions.

The move put the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in an ?impossible situation,? according to Campbell, and potentially constituted ?the worst crisis in 150 years? in Anglican-Catholic relations.

According to Noyes? description of the conversation, Campbell warned that the move could unleash latent anti-Catholicism in the United Kingdom, and even provoke acts of violence in isolated cases.

The cable from the U.S. diplomats expressed doubt about ?whether the damage to inter-Christian relations was worth it,? especially, it said, ?since the number of disaffected Anglicans that will convert is likely to be a trickle rather than a wave.?

tAnother cable from January 2009 from Noyes, written in the wake of a global controversy provoked by Pope Benedict?s decision to lift the excommunications of four traditionalist Catholic bishops, including one who is a Holocaust denier, said the case revealed a serious ?communications gap? in the Vatican.

tThat gap, according to the cable, leads to ?muddled, reactive messaging that reduces the volume of the moral megaphone the Vatican uses to advance its objectives.?

tThe Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, is the only senior papal aide to use a Blackberry, according to the cable, and most senior Vatican officials don?t even use e-mail accounts.

tBecause senior Vatican officials typically do not understand the nature of modern communications, the cable asserted, they often speak in ?coded? language impossible for the outside world to decipher. Noyes cited an example from the Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, who said he had been given a letter from the Vatican which supposedly contained a positive message for his country, but it was ?so veiled he missed it, even when told it was there.?

tPart of the communications problem, the cable asserted, is structural: Lombardi is not part of the pope?s inner circle, so he ?is the deliverer, rather than a shaper, of the message,? and he is ?terribly overworked.?

tIn the wider Catholic world, the cable added, there are communications success stories ? pointing in particular to the way the Catholic group Opus Dei responded to the frenzy created by the novel and movie ?The Da Vinci Code.?

tIn general, the cable reported there's ferment in the Vatican about the need for better communications strategies, but little concrete sense of what to do about it.

?Our Vatican contacts seem to be talking about nothing but the need for better internal coordination on decisions and planned public messages,? it said. ?But if or when change will come remains an open question.?

For the moment, it doesn't seem that today's disclosures are likely to create a diplomatic crisis, especially given that the Vatican announced preemptively that it did not want the WikiLeaks revelations to disrupt U.S./Vatican ties.

For one thing, Vatican officials realize that at least some of the critical assessments expressed in the leaked cables, especially on the PR front, are widely shared inside the Vatican itself. In addition, the Obama White House has tried to send reassuring signals to Rome, including the recent appointment of a presidential delegation to attend the Nov. 20 consistory for the creation of 24 new cardinals. It was the first time a U.S. president sent an official delegation to a consistory, and it was seen in the Vatican as a diplomatic way of expressing respect.

At mid-morning, Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, released a statement in both Italian and English on the WikiLeaks disclosures.

"Without venturing to evaluate the extreme seriousness of publishing such a large amount of secret and confidential material, and its possible consequences" the statement read, "the Holy See Press Office observes that part of the documents published recently by Wikileaks concerns reports sent to the U.S. State Department by the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See."

"Naturally these reports reflect the perceptions and opinions of the people who wrote them," the statement said, "and cannot be considered as expressions of the Holy See itself, nor as exact quotations of the words of its officials. Their reliability must, then, be evaluated carefully and with great prudence, bearing this circumstance in mind."

U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Miguel Diaz likewise issued a statement, condemning the leaks "in the strongest possible terms" while declining to comment on their authenticity.

The United States and the Holy See are working together on multiple fronts, Diaz said, from fixing the global economy to human rights, climate change and interfaith dialogue, and those partnerships "will withstand this challenge."

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