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Diagnosing the 'implosion' of Benedict's Vatican

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 28, 2011 NCR Today

ROME -- Perhaps the most telling index of the severity of the various PR and managerial catastrophes which have beset the papacy of Benedict XVI is that there?s now a budding literary genre attempting to explain them. It?s also a measure of the reduced global profile of the papacy these days that, to date, the Italians basically have a monopoly on it.

Last year brought *Attaco a Ratzinger: Accuse e scandali, profezie e complotti contro Benedetto XVI* (?Attack on Ratzinger: Accusations and Scandals, Prophecies and Plots against Benedict XVI?) by two of the best Italian Vatican writers going, Paolo Rodari and Andrea Tornielli. Though hardly blind to the Vatican?s own failures, Rodari and Tornielli also suggested there?s an effort afoot to damage the moral authority of the pope and the church, perhaps even of cosmic dimensions. (One chapter ponders whether Benedict?s woes were foretold by Fatima and other Marian apparitions.)

Now we have another take, in the form of

?Once Upon a Time, There was a Vatican? by Massimo Franco, a veteran political writer for *Corriere della Sera*, Italy?s most prestigious daily newspaper. Franco has long explored the intersection between faith and politics, as witnessed by his 2005 book *Imperi paralleli* (?Parallel Empires?) about relations between the Holy See and the United States.

tIn terms of the building blocks of his argument, Franco covers much the same ground as Rodari and Tornielli: the sexual abuse scandals; the crisis over lifting the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop; conflicts within the Vatican, even among cardinals, ?worthy of the epoch of the Borgias?; the notorious Boffo case, in which senior Vatican officials were accused of sabotaging the director of the Italian bishops? newspaper by leaking false documents suggesting he harassed a woman because he wanted to pursue a gay affair with her boyfriend; and on and on.

t?Implosion,? Franco suggests, is the word many Vatican-watchers apply to the current state of affairs. There?s a palpable sense of *fin du régime* in the Roman air, he says; Franco quotes diplomats accredited to the Holy See comparing themselves to the final ambassadors to the Republic of Venice just before its collapse in 1797.

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tYet Franco applies a different spin to this malaise. The meltdowns of the last five years are symptoms rather than causes, he says, of a much deeper crisis. They?re signs of the end of an epoch, in which the Vatican represented the religious and moral sentiments of Western civilization, and the dawn of a new era in which Catholicism has become a minority subculture. Neither the Vatican nor the hierarchy more generally has figured out how to respond to this new world, Franco argues, explaining the ?profound confusion? one detects among all the pope?s men.

tThe day of reckoning was held at bay for a half-century by the Cold War, and for a quarter-century by the towering charisma of Pope John Paul II, Franco says, but now the bill has come due.

tFranco refers to ?a Vatican? in the book?s title because he doesn?t mean to suggest that the Vatican itself is passing away. In any conceivable scenario, it will continue to be an important global institution and a point of reference for Catholics everywhere. What?s now in decay, he argues, is instead a certain kind of Vatican ? the Vatican as chaplain of the West, treated with deference by courts and governments, able to shape history by the exercise of its institutional power. Something new has to replace that Vatican, he says, and its outlines are still vague.

tFranco?s diagnosis has ruffled feathers in some Vatican circles, especially those around Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State. Franco not only faults Bertone for weak internal governance and a lack of geopolitical vision ? due, Franco suggests, to a preoccupation with Italian affairs ? but also says some of his early moves were animated by ambitions to be the next pope. (If that?s really true, most church-watchers would say it?s a long shot; fairly or not, Bertone is associated with such a string of disasters that some cardinals would regard it as akin to electing the captain of the Titanic as CEO of the steamship company.)

tYet in broad strokes, Franco?s argument is actually fairly Vatican-friendly, almost to the point of making excuses. He argues that its travails ought to be seen in tandem with the strategic and economic troubles of the United States, all indicators of profound mutations in the global order. The take-away might well be that the fault is not really in Bertone and Benedict?s other aides, but in their stars.

tIn truth, the stumbles of Benedict?s papacy are probably fueled by a combination of factors: the personal characteristics of Benedict?s team, including an emphasis on family spirit which, at times, comes at the expense of subject-matter competence; cultural hostility to the church?s teaching and to Benedict XVI, sketched by Rodari and Tornielli, which circulates in the media, the academy, the legal profession, and even in some sectors of the church; and broad global transformations, especially the emergence of a fragmented post-modern culture in the West, highlighted by Franco.

tIn that complicated mix, *C?era Una Volta un Vaticano* is an important contribution, exposing a shift in the historical plates which lies beneath the occasional earthquakes in Rome. One hopes the book will eventually find an English publisher.

tLater this week, I?ll have an interview with Franco on the book and the reactions it?s generated.

John Allen is in Rome for the next week. Check back to NCRonline.org[2] frequently for more reports and exclusive coverage.

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