

A triptych on Benedict's papacy, and hints of what lies beyond

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 13, 2011 All Things Catholic

Three Vatican stories which unfolded during the past week, taken together, form a sort of triptych. They're like three scenes in a single work of art, illustrating different features of the same subject.

Those stories were:

- A shake-up in the Roman Curia
- A May 7-8 papal trip to Venice
- A May 7 retrospective on John Paul II in Spoleto

I'll sketch these panels in turn, because each tells us something interesting about the papacy of Benedict XVI -- and each, perhaps, may offer just a hint or two about what might lie beyond.

A curial shake-up

On May 10, two key personnel moves were announced by Pope Benedict XVI.

Italian Archbishop Fernando Filoni was named Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, traditionally known as "Propaganda Fide." Since June 2007, Filoni had been the "substitute" in the Secretariat of State, which is the Vatican's key position for internal church affairs -- something like the White House Chief of Staff. Meanwhile, Archbishop Giovanni Becciu, also an Italian, was named to take over as "substitute." Becciu is a veteran of the Vatican's diplomatic service, most recently in Angola from 2001 to 2009 and then in Cuba.

Two observations suggest themselves.

First, by consensus the role of the "substitute" is the most complex job in the Roman Curia. Whoever holds it has to keep a staggering range of details in resident memory, and the administrative success or failure of a papacy often rests on his shoulders. Those who have played it well over the years have been the stuff of legend: Giovanni Battista Montini, for instance, was the substitute under Pius XII from 1937 to 1953, and went on to become Pope Paul VI; Giovanni Benelli, who was Paul's own substitute from 1967 to 1977, was widely understood to be the power behind the throne.

Given how difficult it is to master the role, many observers found it curious that Filoni would be shipped out after less than four years, to be replaced by someone in Becciu who has no previous experience at all working inside the Vatican. Those who know Becciu say he's a genial and effective diplomat, loyal to his superiors at the Secretariat of State -- but that's not quite the same thing as readiness to step into what is arguably the most demanding administrative position in the Catholic Church.

(It may be, of course, that Becciu rises to the occasion. Filoni too was never a creature of the Curia, having served in Vatican embassies around the world since 1982 -- including a memorable stretch as the nuncio to Iraq, when he was the only ambassador not to leave Baghdad during the U.S.-led invasion in April 2003.)

When the dust settles, the most obvious beneficiary of these moves would seem to be Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State, who will not have to be concerned about the new substitute forming a rival center of power. Becciu is said to stand well outside the normal curial power blocs. By virtue of being Sardinian, he's also not part of the usual Italian regional networks focused on Lombardy, or Emilia-Romagna, and so on.

The question, however, is whether clarity about who's in charge may be achieved at the expense of elevating someone who's going to need a fair bit of on-the-job training -- compounding what critics, at least, have sometimes seen as a deficit of governance under Bertone.

Second, the appointment of Filoni to Propaganda Fide, replacing Indian Cardinal Ivan Dias, is the latest chapter of what one might call the "re-Italianization" of the Roman Curia under Pope Benedict XVI.

As of this writing, four of the Vatican's nine congregations, one of its three tribunals, and six of its twelve pontifical councils are led by Italians. In the Secretariat of State, the top official, Bertone, and his most important deputy, now Becciu, are also both Italians.

To be sure, Benedict XVI tries to ensure that major Catholic cultures are represented in Rome. When he recently needed a new prefect of the Congregation for Religious, for instance, Benedict made it clear he wanted a Brazilian. Part of the reason Benedict may have felt comfortable sending Filoni to Propaganda Fide, in fact, is because he recently tapped Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-Fai, of Hong Kong, as its number two official.

Still, it's striking that 13 of the 25 most senior decision-making positions in Benedict's papacy are now held by Italians.

This preference for Italians is, in some ways, the most natural thing in the world. Benedict tends to assign senior positions to people he knows and trusts; as he told journalist Peter Seewald in *Light of the World*, he wants a family spirit among his top aides. By virtue of having served in Rome for a quarter-century, a disproportionate share of the people he knows to share that outlook will inevitably be Italians.

In the case of Propaganda Fide, there may also be a special logic for an Italian. From an administrative point of view, the department is a behemoth, controlling a complex network of financial assets and real estate holdings designed to generate support for overseas missions. For just this reason, the head of Propaganda Fide over the centuries has been known as the "Red Pope."

One of Filoni's immediate tasks will be to bring Propaganda Fide into compliance with a new financial reform decreed by Benedict XVI, which came on-line in April. One aim of that reform is to avoid the financial scandals that arose under Propaganda Fide's former prefect, Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe of Naples, who has been accused of cutting sweetheart deals for Italian politicians on apartments in exchange for funneling millions of Euro in public funds to his office for restoration work that was never actually performed. The calculus may have been that because the financial sleight-of-hand to be reformed reflects Italian ways of doing business, it requires an Italian to get things under control.

Whatever the logic, it seems fair to say that for the foreseeable future, Italian sensibilities will loom awfully large in defining the outlook and priorities of the papacy of Benedict XVI. Whether that's good or bad, helpful to the church's fortunes or a hindrance, is almost beside the point -- it is what it is.

The trip to Venice

For the Venetians, Pope Benedict XVI's May 7-8 visit was a chance to celebrate the rich history of their church, which has shaped culture not only in the Adriatic region of Italy, but also as far afield as Carinthia, Croatia and Slovenia.

Some 300,000 people turned out for Benedict's open-air Mass in San Giuliano de Mestre Park on Sunday, where he applauded the Venetians for "promoting a culture of welcoming and sharing, capable of building bridges of dialogue between peoples and nations."

The trip was also, of course, a chance for the usual photo-ops of the pontiff in a gondola, without which no papal outing to Venice would be complete.

For the outside world, however, the trip was mostly of interest as a way to showcase the Cardinal of Venice, 69-year-old Angelo Scola. By any standard, Scola is not only an important part of the church's present, but someone who could play an even greater role in its future.

There are at least three reasons to keep an eye on Scola.

First, he has enormous influence with Benedict XVI. Scola is a veteran member of the "Communio" school in Catholic theology co-founded by the current pope decades ago, and he shares Benedict's passion for the late Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. Scola also comes out of the Communion and Liberation movement, which is Benedict's favorite among the "new movements" in the Catholic Church. To illustrate Scola's pull, it's enough to recall that it was Scola who suggested several months ago that Benedict consider creating a Vatican department dedicated to "New Evangelization," which he promptly did.

Second, current rumors in Italy peg Scola as a serious candidate to become the next Archbishop of Milan, a job which almost automatically makes its incumbent a point of reference for the universal church. The global influence of Archbishops of Milan stretches back to St. Charles Borromeo in the 16th century, and is as recent as Jesuit Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Another widely mentioned candidate for Milan is Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, currently the President of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture. Both Scola and Ravasi were ordained as priests of Milan, and both are already considered serious contenders to be pope someday. If either were to get Milan, it would certainly burnish their status as a frontrunner in the papal sweepstakes.

(By the way, one dark horse possibility for Milan could be Italian Archbishop Luigi Ventura, 66, who since 2009 has been the pope's ambassador to France. Between 2001 and 2009, Ventura served as the papal nuncio in Canada, where most observers credit him with reshaping the Anglophone wing of the Canadian bishops' conference in a more "evangelical" direction, though avoiding ideological extremes. Someone like Ventura might be an attractive compromise if backers of Scola and Ravasi find themselves deadlocked.)

Third, even if Scola doesn't get Milan, his current post in Venice is already quite a platform in terms of church leadership. As Benedict XVI himself pointed out over the weekend, during the 20th century three patriarchs of Venice went on to become popes: John Paul I, Blessed John XXIII, and St. Pius X.

Sandri in Spoleto

Speaking of former substitutes, Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, currently the Prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, held that demanding job from 2000 to 2007. Among other things, it was Sandri who announced the

death of John Paul II to the world from St. Peter's Square on April 2, 2005. Famously, Sandri said: "We all feel like orphans tonight."

Sandri, 67, was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to a family of Italian immigrants from the Trentino region.

Last Saturday, Sandri was the featured speaker at an event in the small Italian city of Spoleto, about an hour and a half north of Rome, organized by veteran Reuters correspondent Philip Pullella. Phil had put together an impressive display of photos and other memorabilia of Pope John Paul II, drawing largely on the work of Reuters photographers. The Archbishop of Spoleto, Renato Boccardo, volunteered to host the Reuters exhibit around the time of John Paul's beatification -- in part because earlier in his career, Boccardo served as the principal organizer of John Paul's travels.

Phil asked a few colleagues to make the trip to speak at the May 7 event, including Rachel Donadio of *The New York Times*, Greg Burke of Fox News, Italian Vaticanista Marco Politi, and myself. The panel was coordinated by Alessio Vinci, who once upon a time was CNN's Rome correspondent, but who is now a major star of Italian TV.

Sandri was the ecclesiastical celebrity, and in his talk, he tried to explain what made John Paul II such a magnet for humanity.

"The secret of his capacity to capture the human person," Sandri said, "stands in his ability to touch the essentials of the human mystery, to stir the irrepressible nostalgia for God which lives in the depths of the human spirit."

After the prepared remarks, we spent most of our time telling stories from John Paul's travels. In the end, as Pullella put it, "the only thing missing today was a plane."

As it happened, just days before I had published a somewhat whimsical piece ticking off three *papabili*, or contenders to be the next pope, and Sandri was on my list. That could have made things in Spoleto a bit awkward, as perceptions of campaigning for the papacy are a bit like the third rail of Vatican politics -- no one, ever, wants to be seen as hustling for the job. In the event, however, Sandri was gracious, and everyone else had the good taste not to mention the piece.

Like anyone who's been in leadership a long time, Sandri has faced some criticism over the years. Because Sandri was a top deputy to Cardinal Angelo Sodano, some question marks about Sodano -- such as his role in the case of Fr. Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ -- spill over onto Sandri. For another, during a brief stint as nuncio in Mexico in 2000, Sandri played a role in the ouster of Bishop Samuel Ruiz from the Chiapas diocese. Ruiz was a hero to the liberation theology movement, and some saw the transition in Chiapas as an ideologically motivated crackdown.

That said, the usual line on Sandri is that he's a "safe hands" leader, a tremendously talented manager who can be counted upon to make the trains run on time. Conventional wisdom would also tell you, however, that he's not a charismatic public figure, the kind of guy who turns the world on with his smile.

At that level, the discovery from Spoleto is that when he wants to, Sandri can be a charmer.

For instance, Sandri told a story over lunch about a trip he took to Los Angeles in early July 2009, in order to attend a meeting organized by the Maronite church. As it happened, this was roughly the same time that the death of Michael Jackson was the dominant story in the American media. So when Sandri presented his Vatican passport at LAX, an official of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection service asked him, totally in earnest: "Oh, are you part of the Vatican delegation for the Michael Jackson funeral?" Laughingly, Sandri said he had to

explain there was no such animal.

Anyone inclined to see Sandri as a bit ?gray?, therefore, may simply not have caught him at the right moment.

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