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Vatican critics smell blood in the water, and remembering Sambini

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

If it wasn't clear already, recent events have conclusively driven home the following observation: Right now, people with a beef against the Vatican smell blood in the water.

Consider what we've seen in just the last 10 days:

- On Monday the Vatican recalled its ambassador in Ireland for consultations, following a blistering July 20 attack from Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny against the "dysfunction, disconnection and elitism, the narcissism, which dominates the culture of the Vatican to this day." Kenny was reacting to a recent government report on the Cloyne diocese, which found that allegations of sexual abuse were being mishandled as recently as 2009. Some in Ireland have floated the idea of extending criminal liability for failure to report abuse even to the sacrament of confession.
- China is pressing ahead with the illicit ordination of Catholic bishops in defiance of papal authority, including the Leshan diocese in late June and the Shantou diocese in mid-July. Abandoning their normal "one step forward, one step back" diplomacy, Chinese authorities issued a statement this week blasting the "unreasonable" and "brutal" Vatican response in declaring the bishops excommunicated. (The statement also insisted the bishops are "devout in their faith," which, as renowned sinologist Fr. Bernardo Cervellera has observed, amounts to the ironic twist of having their Catholic orthodoxy certified by an officially atheistic state.)
- Even in Italy, critics are coming out of the woodwork. This week, Pietro Orlandi demanded that the Vatican open its secret archives to reveal the truth about the 1983 disappearance of his sister

Emanuela, which remains one of the great unsolved mysteries of contemporary Italian life. At the time, the Orlandi family lived inside the Vatican city-state as employees. Recently a former member of the Italian mob asserted that the Vatican owed the mob 20 billion lire (roughly \$12.5 million), and Emanuela was taken in an attempt to compel repayment. Pietro Orlandi told the Italian daily *La Stampa* he finds that suggestion perfectly credible, and wants senior Vatican officials to come clean.

If Pope Benedict XVI, currently summering at Castel Gandolfo, feels a migraine headache coming on, it's not hard to understand why.

What's new isn't the criticism itself. Important currents in Ireland have long resented what they see as clerical privilege and the vestiges of theocracy, the Chinese have always feared a Catholic church whose loyalties run more to Rome than Beijing, and conspiratorially-minded Italians generally believe the Vatican capable of anything. The novelty is instead the brazenness of these outbursts, which suggest a sense of a wounded foe.

Of course, one can take different views of the merits of each case.

In Ireland, one could argue that the central failure in Cloyne under former Bishop John Magee wasn't so much blind obedience to the Vatican, but defiance of it. Beginning in 2001, Rome took a harder line on abuse cases, requiring that accusations be forwarded to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and advising bishops to cooperate with police and prosecutors. Obviously that's not the path Magee followed, perhaps because, as a former private secretary to three popes, he felt free to do as he liked. In that sense, the Cloyne story may be less about a Vatican-orchestrated cover-up, and more about a lack of oversight for bishops.

It's also possible to point out that there was a government report on Cloyne partly because the Catholic church in Ireland conducted its own investigation in 2008. The church's National Board for Safeguarding Children was bitterly critical of Magee at the time, so much so that his aides actually threatened to sue. One might thus contend that Cloyne proves the church's new safeguards, however belated, actually work.

Finally, one can also detect the whiff of politics in Kenny's remarks. In Ireland these days, taking on the Vatican is a fairly risk-free investment for anyone seeking public support.

In China, it seems clear that wherever one stands on procedures for selecting bishops, government policy isn't about a principled defense of the local church so much as maintaining the state's monopoly on power. Chinese officials may well have calculated that now is the time to press ahead, since recent blows to the Vatican's moral authority suggest that Western governments may be less inclined to come to its defense under the rubric of religious freedom.

In Italy, one could certainly question how much stock to put in the testimony of former Mafiosi -- especially guys who seem interested in becoming jailhouse celebrities.

Setting aside the rights and wrongs, however, the bottom line is that in a growing number of cultural settings, the lid has been ripped off accumulated frustrations. The question now becomes, how will the Vatican respond?

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Will officials suck it up, concluding that however exaggerated or unfair they may feel some of this criticism to be, their accent has to be on generosity -- understanding why people feel hurt, and trying to meet them halfway?

That seemed the tone of a July 21 statement from the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, on Ireland. While insisting that the debate must have the "necessary objectivity," Lombardi said the Vatican wants to do everything possible to "restore trust" between church and society. Pointedly, he avoided any tit-for-tat with the Irish PM.

Of course, Lombardi is a legendarily gentle soul whose own statements always come off as rational and measured. It's sometimes not entirely clear, however, to what extent he's able to speak for a broader climate of opinion in the Vatican.

The other option is succumbing to a "they're out to get us" mentality, inducing officials to batten the hatches and shut down lines of conversation.

Especially at a time when Pope Benedict XVI has called for a "New Evangelization" of the secular world, a great deal may hinge on which way the winds blow. Perhaps one unintended result of this ferment may be a sense of direction for the recently launched Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, which from the beginning has seemed to some observers like a noble cause in search of a job description.

With its "A-list" membership, including some of the premier heavyweights in the Catholic world, perhaps the new council can take lead in developing a patient, humble response to criticism, seeing that as a prerequisite to any successful missionary endeavor.

(As a footnote, the "new evangelization" is the theme of Pope Benedict XVI's annual meeting with his former students, known in German as his *Schülerkreis*, which is set for Aug. 26-28 at Castel Gandolfo. It's also the subject of the next Synod of Bishops in Rome, scheduled for Oct. 7-28, 2012.)

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As this column was going to press, the sad news broke that Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the papal nuncio in the United States since December 2005, had died at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore following complications from lung surgery. Sambi was 73.

A lifetime Vatican diplomat, Sambi began his service in 1969 with a posting in Cameroon. Over the course of his career, Sambi served in Cuba, Algeria, Nicaragua, Belgium, India, Burundi and Indonesia. In 1998, Sambi became the nuncio to the Holy Land, and in 2005 he took up his post in the United States.

I knew Sambi fairly well, having first met him during the late 1990s during his stretch in the Holy Land. I would see him in Rome from time to time, and I also spoke to him on the phone periodically as issues in the Middle East flared up. I came to regard him as a smart and balanced observer of the region's politics, blending tremendous diplomatic discipline while speaking on the record with remarkable candor off it.

One testimony to Sambi's effectiveness: At different points, both the Israeli Ambassador to the Holy See and a prominent Palestinian churchman, very committed to the Palestinian cause, pulled me aside to express concern that Sambi wasn't fully sympathetic to their positions. Yet when his term in the Holy Land ended in 2005, both told me they were sorry to see him go.

When Sambi was dispatched to the States, I therefore thought it boded well for the American church. For one thing, Sambi's English was terrific, which meant that he didn't have to rely on intermediaries to interpret America for him; he could get out and experience it for himself. For another, his natural curiosity and gregariousness created a wide circle of contacts, so he wasn't just hearing from one side of the street or one set of voices.

Sambi genuinely liked the United States. As Archbishop Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, put it in a July 28 statement, Sambi "understood and loved our nation."

(His affection, however, was not uncritical. Among other things, he told me a few weeks ago that he was coming to despair about the press culture in the United States, which he saw as increasingly more interested in placating biases rather than presenting a balanced picture. As he half-jokingly put it, "The media here is becoming too much like Italy.")

Sambi's personality also opened doors. A couple of years ago, he and I shared the stage at an assembly of leaders in men's religious orders in the United States. Sambi, of course, gave a speech, but that's not really what most religious remember. Instead, they were struck by the fact that, like them, he shed his clerical dress for a loose-fitting, short-sleeved shirt for the working sessions, and that rather than fleeing immediately after his talk, he stuck around to share a meal and to chat -- both not what they expected from a big-time Vatican potentate.

Sambi also had a great sense of humor. During his talk at that meeting, he jokingly referred to his "Oxford English." When I later quipped that in light of his Italian accent, his English was really more Guido Sarducci than John Henry Newman, nobody laughed louder.

Perhaps his greatest triumph came with Pope Benedict XVI's April 2008 visit to the United States. Sambi was instrumental in organizing the pope's meeting with five victims of sexual abuse in the chapel of the nunciature, or ambassador's residence, in Washington. It was the first such encounter, and set the template for all other meetings to come.

One cornerstone of a nuncio's job, of course, is to shape the appointment of a country's bishops. It's well known that Sambi didn't always get his way, but his influence was nevertheless considerable. Over the last six years, the profile of a typical "Sambi bishop" has been someone who's unquestionably orthodox, but not a cultural warrior or an ideologue. (Sambi was at times put off by the seemingly monolithic focus of some American Catholic leaders on the "life issues". He once told me, "You have to be pro-life to be Catholic, but to be Catholic it's not enough to be pro-life.")

Ever the creature of the *Accademia*, the Vatican's elite school for diplomats, Sambi was the kind of guy who always hated to tip his hand. One of my last conversations with him came this spring, talking about the appointment of a new archbishop in Philadelphia. In typical fashion, when I asked him off the record what he was hearing about who might wind up in Philadelphia, he turned it around and asked: "Tell me, what are *you* hearing?"

Sambi, of course, was not without his critics. Like most diplomats, he was adept at shifting with the wind, and his penchant for answering questions with questions could leave people puzzled about what he was trying to say (which, in some cases, was probably intentional). It was also sometimes hard to figure out exactly where Sambi stood with the home office in Rome, and whether what he was telling you truly reflected the thinking either in the Secretariat of State or the papal apartment.

Prior to his illness, it was rumored that Sambi's term in the States was coming to an end and that he would

be returning to Rome to take up a semi-honorary Vatican position, in which he could become a cardinal. As it turns out, that was not to be. Those of us fortunate enough to have known him, however, will remember him nonetheless as a true Eminence.

Sambi's funeral Mass is set for Aug. 6 at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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