

Five questions about the Vatican's leaks scandal

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 17, 2012 All Things Catholic

In the run-up to a consistory, Rome takes on the atmosphere of a college reunion. Church people from all over turn up, making it hard to walk down the street without bumping into someone you know. That's been the case this week, ahead of Saturday's consistory in which Pope Benedict XVI will create 22 new cardinals, including Americans Timothy Dolan and Edwin O'Brien.

This week, whenever such a chance encounter has occurred, conversation fairly quickly has turned to one question above all: What the hell is going on around here?

The basis for the question, of course, is the mushrooming Vatican leaks scandal, in which confidential documents are appearing in the papers almost on a daily basis, putting the Vatican in a highly unfavorable light. By now, there are almost too many to keep track, but big-ticket items have included:

- Letters written to the pope and to the Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, by the current papal ambassador in the United States, Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, complaining of corruption in Vatican finances and a campaign of defamation against him. At the time, he was the No. 2 official in the Vatican City State, and desperately trying to avoid being sent away.
- An anonymous memo written about a new Vatican law against money laundering, which suggests the law contains an enormous loophole -- that it blocks action against any offense before April 1, 2011, when the law came into effect.
- Leaked materials fueling charges that the Institute for the Works of Religion (the so-called "Vatican Bank") recently transferred millions of Euro to foreign banks to evade Italian controls, and that it's dodged various Italian inquests.
- Another anonymous document, written in German, describing a conversation Cardinal Paolo Romeo of Palermo, Sicily, allegedly had during a trip to China, in which he predicted the pope would be dead within 12 months and replaced with Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan. That document was passed along to the pope by retired Colombian Cardinal Dar'o Castrillón Hoyos.
- Two internal Vatican memos, including one written by Cardinal Atillio Nicora, who heads a new financial watchdog agency, warning that recent modifications to the Vatican's law against money laundering would be seen as a "step back" on reform, and could create "alarm" among international regulatory bodies.

As this column is written, rumors have it that more leaked documents are on the way, perhaps as early as the end of this week. Obviously, someone inside the Vatican -- what *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, recently called a bunch of irresponsible "wolves" -- has decided to let the photocopies roll.

In the spirit of this week's conversations around Rome, here are five questions and answers about the current spate of Vatican scandals.

How bad is all this?

This is a strange case in which it's not so much the content of the leaks, but the fact of them, which is the real problem.

As the dust has settled, none of the recent revelations seems especially fatal. The story of the anti-papal plot collapsed under its own silliness, while the Vatican has issued unusually thorough point-by-point explanations of the materials concerning IOR and its new money-laundering law. If anything, publication of the Viganò letters actually might have helped the Vatican. Before, Viganò just looked like a reformer who got the shaft. The letters, however, revealed a somewhat defensive streak, making it easier to believe his removal could have been about personality rather than policy.

Yet whatever one makes of them, these documents are all real, and they're really being leaked. Vatican personnel themselves are fueling the scandal, which is taking both an internal and an external toll.

Internally, the situation has some church leaders alarmed and, in a few cases, hopping mad. For one thing, bishops around the world would like to think they can share confidential information with the pope and Bertone without reading about it in the newspapers. More basically, both the leaks and the apparent motives behind them reduce confidence that Vatican decisions will be made on merits rather than being swept into petty internal squabbles -- especially, it has to be said, if they end up in the Secretariat of State. As one senior prelate, who's nobody's idea of a flaming liberal, told me this week, "I wouldn't bring a problem here right now to save my life."

In other words, the Vatican risks losing trust -- not among its critics or enemies (that boat probably sailed long ago), but among its best friends.

Externally, where perception is often reality, it almost doesn't matter if the documents are truly damaging. The public take-away already is that the Vatican is once again mired in scandal, fueled by churchmen stabbing one another in the back. That perception makes it more difficult to tell any other story about the Catholic church (including basically good news for the Vatican, such as its recent sex abuse summit or its efforts at financial *glasnost*), and hardly provides a promising launch to Benedict XVI's project of a "new evangelization."

So how bad is all this? The answer is, fairly bad.

Who's leaking this stuff?

To date, nobody knows. The three things most observers agree on are:

- The leaks have the effect of making Bertone look bad, leading many to believe they're coming from insiders hostile to him.
- At least some seem to be coming from within the Secretariat of State itself, or rather, Bertone's own shop.
- For the most part, this would not seem to be about a courageous whistle-blower who's trying to expose wrong-doing or prompt reform. The motives seem more personal and political.

Beyond that, three popular theories are making the rounds, but they're merely hunches and speculation. I summarize them here only because they've become ubiquitous in the papers and on TV, and thus they're part of the story.

One view holds that the leaks stem from people close to Cardinal Angelo Sodano, former Secretary of State under John Paul II and current dean of the College of Cardinals.

The theory goes that Sodano's crowd represents an old guard in the Secretariat of State that has neither forgiven nor forgotten the fact that Bertone is an outsider, someone who got his job because he worked for Benedict XVI in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. That resentment has been compounded, or so the thinking goes, by the fact that the current "substitute," meaning Bertone's top deputy, is also basically an outsider. Archbishop Giovanni Angelo Becciu comes out of the Vatican diplomatic corps, but prior to his appointment in May, he'd never worked in the Secretariat of State.

Another interpretation holds that the leaks come from Italians with links to Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the powerful former president of the Italian bishops' conference. According to this view, Ruini's allies resent the fact that Bertone clashed with Ruini over his successor at the bishops' conference, and more generally, that Bertone has taken over the role of primary spokesperson for the church in Italian affairs.

A third view holds that the leaks originate in circles around Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, prefect of the Congregation for Clergy. Piacenza hails from Genoa, from the school of the late Cardinal Giuseppe Siri (the famous "pope who was never elected," a perennial favorite papal candidate of the church's conservative wing). Piacenza has worked in the Vatican since 1990. Under this view, Piacenza sees himself as a logical successor to Bertone, or at least as a candidate to play an enhanced Vatican role should Benedict XVI decide that Bertone needs help running the show.

While all these theories have a surface plausibility, a strong note of caution is in order: They may also reflect cultural psychology in Italy, which holds there must always be a grand hidden design underneath surface events. Italians have a word for it, *dietrologia*, which literally means "behind-ology." The fact that there is no English equivalent is telling.

It's possible the hunt for a Vatican version of a unified field theory is misguided. Since the documents are heterogeneous, the sources might be different in each case.

The Viganò letters, for instance, might have been leaked by friends still smarting over his removal; the financial documents could be coming from people at the IOR or another Vatican office with personal axes to grind. As far as the letter about an anti-papal plot discussed in China, some believe the aim was to weaken Scola as a papal candidate, others that it was designed to block a gradual process of détente between the Vatican and the Chinese government. Of course, in some cases, it could be as simple as that somebody in the Vatican happens to be friends with a few journalists, realizes this stuff makes good copy and isn't worried about the consequences of letting it loose.

Whatever the case, the Vatican has launched an internal investigation, but it remains to be seen if that will stop the bleeding.

What's the fallout for Bertone?

If the aim of the leaks is truly to undercut Bertone, one wonders what the point is for two reasons. First, Benedict XVI has made his personal affection and support for Bertone abundantly clear; and second, to be honest, it's not as if Bertone needed the help in terms of calling his leadership into question.

Ever since the cause célèbre surrounding the decision to lift the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying traditionalist bishop in 2009, it's been the Vatican's worst-kept secret that many insiders regard Bertone as a weak Secretary of State. He's well liked on a personal level, and no one questions his personal integrity or his loyalty to Benedict XVI, but there's long been serious doubt about his capacity to make the trains run on time.

Bertone is now 77, and some have speculated this latest meltdown might convince Benedict XVI to accept his

resignation. Others wonder if a more face-saving solution might be found in which Bertone would stay in place in a sort of titular fashion, while the pope appoints another figure, along the lines of a "proto-secretary," to do more of the heavy lifting.

Yet given that Benedict XVI is disinclined to worry much about matters of governance, and probably wouldn't want to reward a campaign of character assassination, the smart money is likely on Bertone staying in place.

If so, the \$64,000 question becomes: Is there a way to fix the Vatican's internal disarray without a change at the top? Many of the cardinals who are meeting today with Pope Benedict XVI for a day of prayer and reflection ahead of tomorrow's consistory, could quite possibly find themselves pondering that very point.

What does this mean for the next pope?

There are two bits of fallout that seem to have implications for the next conclave.

First, whenever the cardinals next gather to elect a pope, high on their to-do list will be finding someone who can get the Vatican's internal affairs in order. If a candidate seems to have a mixed record running his own diocese or the Vatican office he presently heads, that's likely to be the kiss of death.

It's not that administrative chops will be the only thing the cardinals are looking for, but it's now become a baseline for giving someone serious consideration.

Second, the current scandal might well have reduced the odds of the next pope being an Italian, given that these leaks seem to have brought some of the less attractive features of Italian ecclesiastical culture to the surface. At a minimum, the mess has put a serious dent in the old assumption that Italians have a special genius for church governance just because they've lived with the institution for so long and know it from the inside.

Let's put it this way: The next pope could still be an Italian -- but if he is, he'll probably be elected in spite of, not because of, his nationality.

Does this mean anything for the United States?

There are also two dimensions of the story with American implications.

First, the profile of American bishops in Rome has long been that while most might not be great intellectuals or towering spiritual figures, they tend to be good managers, meaning practical figures able to get things done. Although some Americans might quibble, that view is still largely in force here.

Privately, many Italians are already saying that the Vatican needs a shake-up, a fresh approach, and it's natural for them to think of the States as one place where it might be found.

Whether that will be enough to offset the historical taboo against a "superpower pope" is anybody's guess. However, it could render somewhat more plausible a move that would be equally shocking to longtime Vatican insiders: an American Secretary of State.

Second, the present scandal could turn out to be a boon for Viganò as papal ambassador in the States, at least in terms of his dealings with the American bishops.

Here in Rome, where people have actually read his leaked letters, the working assumption is that Viganò has been badly compromised and might even be recalled. Yet most American bishops haven't read the correspondence (which is written in fairly dense Italian), and even if they had, the Vatican personalities Viganò complains about mean nothing to them.

For them, Viganò's story is far simpler: He tried to clean house, drew fire and paid the price. At a time when many of those bishops themselves believe the Vatican is overdue for a house cleaning, that's actually not a bad calling card.

Here's what Dolan, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, [told me about Viganò in an interview Tuesday](#) [1]: "In a way, [it] enhances his credibility as someone who does not look upon the internal workings of the Holy See with rose-colored glasses, but is well aware of difficulties there."

At least for some American bishops, in other words, Viganò seems a welcome change of pace.

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