

## Puccini meets Watergate in 'Vatileaks' scandal

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 27, 2012

### *Analysis*

ROME -- Perhaps only the Vatican could invent a scandal that manages to be almost comically silly and overblown, then suddenly ugly and mean, and finally deadly serious, all wrapped into one wildly complicated Italian melodrama.

Think Puccini meets Watergate, and you'll have some inkling of the climate in Rome in mid-February.

Beginning in late January, supposedly confidential Vatican documents began appearing in the Italian press, with fresh revelations at one stage coming almost every day. As the leaks mounted, so did official frustration; a Vatican spokesman publicly slammed the "disloyalty" of it all, while the Vatican newspaper compared the leakers to a bunch of "wolves."

One sure sign a scandal has made the big time is when a single word is enough to conjure it up, like "Watergate" or "Enron." In this case, the Vatican's own spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, supplied the sound bite. By comparing the current mess to the Wikileaks saga, Lombardi inadvertently gave birth to "Vatileaks."

As of this writing, nobody really knows who's behind the avalanche of secret documents, or what their motives are for putting them into play. Most observers concur, however, that it's not about whistleblowers trying to promote reform, but rather personal and political axes being ground.

This much is for sure: The Vatican has a mess on its hands. Internal tensions seem to be slipping out of control, while even the Vatican's best friends are beginning to wonder if this is any way to run a railroad.

By now there are almost too many leaked documents making the rounds 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 (NCR, Feb. 17-March 1). 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 Works of Religion (the so-called "Vatican Bank") recently transferred millions of euros to foreign banks to evade Italian controls, and that it's dodged various Italian inquests.
- Another anonymous document, written in German, describing a conversation Italian Cardinal Paolo

Romeo of Palermo, Sicily, allegedly had during a trip to China, in which he predicted Pope Benedict XVI would be dead within 12 months and replaced with Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan, Italy. Retired Colombian Cardinal Darío Castrillón Hoyos passed that document along to the pope.

- Two internal Vatican memos, including one written by Cardinal Attilio Nicora, who heads a new financial watchdog agency, warning that recent modifications to the Vatican's anti-money-laundering law would be seen as a "step back" on reform, and could create "alarm" among international regulatory bodies.

The Vatican has launched a couple of internal mole hunts to try to determine the source of the leaks. To date, about the only thing for sure is that at least some of the documents seem to be coming from the Secretariat of State, meaning Bertone's own shop.

One of the ironies of the Vatileaks saga is that it's the fact of the leaks, not really their content, that seems to be doing the Vatican the most harm.

In terms of substance, the story of an anti-papal plot, for instance, collapsed under its own preposterousness. Even if one is prepared to believe that a cardinal in the 21st century might scheme to kill the pope, how credible is it that he would openly discuss it during a business trip to China?

On the financial front, the documents seem more serious, painting a picture of ongoing cronyism and occult transactions despite pledges of reform. The Vatican has issued unusually detailed, point-by-point explanations, trying to argue that either the document's conclusions were mistaken, or that it offered a snapshot of an internal debate that has already been resolved.

On that score, most observers seemed inclined to a wait-and-see attitude. The Vatican is up against a June deadline for compliance with benchmarks established by MONEYVAL, a secular European task force designed to fight money laundering. MONEYVAL is undertaking the first external evaluation of where the Vatican's widely touted financial glasnost stands.

Looking back, the publication of the Viganò letters that began the avalanche of leaks may have done the Vatican a favor.

Before the letters appeared, the impression had been that Viganò was a strong financial reformer who basically got the shaft, dispatched to Washington as a face-saving way of getting rid of him in Rome. The letters, however, also revealed a somewhat defensive streak, making it easier to believe his removal may have been about personality rather than policy.

The Vatican has also tried to reframe the overall picture that these leaks paint.

One of the more creative attempts along those lines has come from Italian Cardinal Fernando Filoni, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and one of 22 new cardinals created by Benedict in a Feb. 18 consistory ceremony.

In essence, Filoni argued that the documents demonstrate the existence of robust internal debates within the Vatican, just like in "any other institution." Their disclosure therefore offers a rebuttal, Filoni said, to critics who "always say there's no democracy or open discussion in the church."

In the end, however, there are two elements of the Vatileaks crisis that can't just be explained away, or dissolved by spin.

First, the scandal is another sign of administrative and managerial drift during this papacy. Benedict regards himself as a teaching pope, taking scant interest in governance, and sometimes over these past six years his

senior aides have looked like the gang that can't shoot straight.

There's little indication those dynamics will change. The Vatileaks story may thus set the stage for a serious discussion of governance, beginning with the Vatican itself, the next time the cardinals gather to elect a pope.

Second, this is one of those rare scandals that have the Vatican's allies and supporters riled, not just its critics and foes. For one thing, senior Catholic leaders around the world would like to think they can share confidential information with the pope and Bertone without reading about it in the newspapers, but right now it would be tough to justify that assumption.

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 in any organization, it's hard for headquarters to move the ball on its priorities if it's lost the confidence of its branch managers, and in truth, the Vatican may be closer to that scenario than it realizes.

Speaking on background, one senior prelate in Rome for the Feb. 18 consistory said that while he continues to prize Benedict's spiritual leadership, he's never seen the administrative side of the Vatican in such bad shape.

"I wouldn't bring a problem here right now," he said, "to save my life."

The comment hints at one final Vatileaks irony.

For decades, some theologians and Catholic reformers have argued that bishops around the world should become less deferential to Rome. In fact, some have wanted that decentralization in the worst way -- and that may be exactly what's happening.

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