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Papal transition, Obama, Nigeria and China

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All Things Catholic

One month from today, Benedict XVI will turn 85. He's now the oldest pope in the last 109 years, since Leo XIII died in 1903 at 93, and will shortly become one of only six popes in the last 500 years to reign past the age of 85. That list includes three pontiffs (Pius IX, Innocent XII and Clement X) who died within a year of turning 85, so if Benedict's basic stability holds up, he'll surpass them in 2013.

As the saying goes, German machinery is built to last!

By itself, Benedict's advanced age probably would invite speculation about what comes next, even though there's no indication of a health crisis. This is, after all, a pontiff who departs next week for a six-day trip to Mexico and Cuba.

Yet it's not just a birthday that has people thinking about succession. There's also a mounting perception that for all of Benedict's brilliance as a teacher, something isn't working in the internal governance of the Vatican, and it's not likely to be fixed on his watch. The tawdry "Vatileaks" scandal is the most recent symptom of a series of maladies -- an inability to keep personal conflicts under control (the Boffo affair), to anticipate the foreseeable results of policy choices (the Holocaust-denying bishop debacle) and to tell even positive stories effectively (the pope's role in the sex abuse crisis).

With this perceived crisis of competence in the background, two prominent voices in Italy have, in effect, declared the informal papal transition season to be open.

Strikingly, both belong to a political and cultural current dubbed the "theo-cons," which includes secular nonbelievers who admire the moral authority of the Catholic church. Both figures who've weighed in lately cheered the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to the papacy in 2005, and both have been among his ardent supporters.

First up was commentator Ernesto Galli della Loggia, who published a column in Italy's most influential newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, calling for a reform in the mechanism for electing popes.

In a nutshell, his idea is to include all the world's bishops and religious superiors in the balloting, meaning an electoral body of roughly 6,000 church leaders -- as a means, in his eyes, not of democratizing the church, but of reinforcing the power of the papacy by setting it free from excessive dependence upon a handful of ecclesiastical nobles.

Galli della Loggia's premise is that the College of Cardinals, which currently enjoys the exclusive right to elect the pope, constitutes a "true and proper oligarchy." The nature of an oligarchy, he says, is that its conflicts are rarely about ideas, but rather personalities, especially whose network of influence and patronage is stronger. That dynamic, he writes, produces "a fatal and comprehensive decline in quality in the leadership class," which

is "forced to entrust its hopes for success not to merit but to other factors."

The leaks scandal, he writes, is a classic example of a "power struggle of a strongly personal nature between this and that exponent of the same institution, between this and that group," which can't help but produce a "deep discrediting" of the institution itself.

Galli della Loggia argues that the fix is not "democratization" in the sense of majority rule, which he describes as an idea "that frankly ought to make one's blood run cold." Instead, he argues for a "further strengthening of the role of the pontiff," preventing it from being "conditioned" by the personal rivalries and careerist ambitions of a handful of figures at the top of the system.

An astute political scientist, Galli della Loggia notes that through the centuries, European monarchs always saw the greatest threat to their own power, and to the stability of the state, in the machinations of the aristocratic nobility. As a result, he notes, enlightened monarchs always sought some sort of popular legitimacy -- a base of support "from below," to counter the pressures "from above" created by the elites.

In a sound bite, Galli della Loggia proposes that instead of an "oligarchic Caesar," the pope ought to become a "democratic Caesar" -- a strong ruler capable of insulating the church against relativism and the fashions of the day, but not dependent for legitimacy exclusively upon the princes of the church.

Galli della Loggia ends his piece by quoting James Madison to the effect that "only if men were angels would laws be unnecessary," and adds, "Even in the Vatican, men aren't angels."

Next to weigh in was Italian journalist Giuliano Ferrara, who edits the newspaper *Il Foglio* and whose fiery rhetoric is always a popular draw in conservative Catholic circles in Italy. (I've covered a couple of his speeches at the annual Communion and Liberation festival in Rimini, where he drew the kind of primal adulation typically reserved to rock stars and sex symbols.)

In effect, the thrust of Ferrara's piece was to tell Benedict XVI that it's OK to resign.

He begins by citing Benedict's now-famous reply about resignation in his 2009 interview book with journalist Peter Seewald: "If a pope clearly realizes that he is no longer physically, psychologically, and spiritually capable of handling the duties of his office," Benedict said, "then he has a right and, under some circumstances, also an obligation to resign."

The inclusion of the term "spiritual," according to Ferrara, indicates that analysis of when resignation is appropriate belongs to the pope's conscience and not just to medical science.

Ferrara opines that Benedict XVI could step down as an act of "spiritual liberty" in a way that ensures "an increase in strength and security in governance" of the Catholic church. Doing so, he suggests, could "remove every slowness, weariness, and defensive spirit from the Roman house of Peter" while at the same time affording Benedict the chance to guide his own succession with "greater harmony and foundation."

Relieving himself of the burdens of governance, Ferrara says, would also mean for Benedict XVI "not the cancellation of his magisterium, but rather renewing and re-launching it." Such an abdication, Ferrara insists, would not weaken the papacy -- it would instead, in his words, be a "sovereign and papal-centric gesture."

Both Galli della Loggia and Ferrara acknowledge that their proposals might be unrealistic, if not slightly fanciful. Yet whatever one makes of them, there are two points to take away that seem fairly clear.

First, the fact that some of the Vatican's biggest fans are ruminating on how the papacy might be strengthened,

either by electoral reform or by resignation, is an indirect confirmation that this one is perceived as weak -- not in terms of ideas, but business management.

Second, the ferment reflected in these pieces consolidates a key insight about the next papal election, whenever it might occur (and, for that matter, whoever might vote in it). A proven track record as a governor, including both the capacity and the willingness to take the reins of power in the Vatican more firmly into his own hands, shapes up as a make-or-break quality for any candidate to succeed Benedict XVI.

Handicappers everywhere, take note.

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American columnist E.J. Dionne recently asked the provocative question of whether the U.S. bishops have decided to "wage an election-year war" against the Obama administration, thereby transforming the Catholic church into the "tea party at prayer."

Dionne's focus was American domestic politics, which can sometimes have a funhouse mirror effect on perceptions -- making small things seem enormous and reducing big things to near invisibility.

If we take a more global perspective, especially bringing the Vatican into view, two things become clear:

- Relationships with presidential administrations, both Democrats and Republicans, always have their flash points. During the Clinton years, there was a massive row with the Vatican over U.N. summits in Cairo and Beijing concerning reproductive health policies, while the Bush years featured a fundamental clash over the war in Iraq.
- Beneath those tensions is a substratum of collaboration that never goes away, even if it rarely packs the same media sex appeal. The Clinton administration supported the late John Paul's efforts to promote debt relief for impoverished nations in the run-up to the Jubilee Year in 2000, while the Bush administration worked with the church and the Vatican on a wide variety of issues, such as anti-AIDS efforts in Africa and the struggle against human trafficking.

It's the same story with Obama, belying impressions of a breakdown in relations.

Last week, the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See staged a conference on migration, held at the Pontifical North American College, the American seminary in the Eternal City, which brought together a cross-section of ambassadors, Vatican officials, experts on migration issues and some of the church's leading activists on the pastoral care of migrants.

Both Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, and Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the pope's representative to the U.N. in Geneva, were on hand. U.S. Ambassador Miguel Diaz, Obama's envoy to the Vatican, convened the event.

A central aim was to broadcast the message that while migration poses obvious challenges, it also creates a wide range of benefits -- cultural, economic, even religious -- for host countries. As a result, speakers argued, generous immigration policies are in the interests of both church and state.

Tomasi, for instance, said throughout history, migrants brought Christianity to new lands. Even today, he said, Catholics from the Philippines, India and Sri Lanka are founding parishes in the Gulf States where they have migrated for work.

"The church sees migration as a resource for development, a positive phenomenon," he said.

Immigration, of course, is one area where the Catholic church and the Obama administration are on fairly good speaking terms.

Other areas where the administration and the Vatican have found overlapping interests include interreligious dialogue, food security, HIV/AIDS and health care (in 2010, the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See facilitated a $10 million annual donation of medicines to Catholic health care agencies), environmental protection, arms control and human rights. Recently, for instance, when Pope Benedict XVI celebrated a Mass commemorating the 200th anniversary of Latin American independence, the U.S. Permanent Envoy to the Organization of American States met with Vatican officials to discuss promotion of human rights in the region.

All this is by way of making two points.

First, the church's relationship with the Obama administration, at least seen in global terms, is probably no more complicated or tense than any other in recent American history. Second, only a tight domestic focus, brought to a boil by the pressures of an election cycle, could suggest that the Catholic church is the tea party at prayer.

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Last Sunday, another Catholic church in Nigeria was bombed, killing at least 10 people in the blast and the retaliatory violence that followed. Most observers assume the attack was orchestrated by the radical Islamist Boko Haram sect, the tip of the spear for ethnic, political and religious violence in Nigeria that has left thousands dead in recent months.

On Wednesday, the Catholic bishops of the Lagos/Ibadan Region, where the bombing took place, issued a statement under the heading "Stop the Slaughter: Salvage the Nigerian Nation." The gist was that the Nigerian government is not doing enough to rein in the terrorists -- including a not-so-veiled warning that if the government doesn't act, Nigerian Christians themselves will take up arms.

"The sight of the dead, the maimed and more innocent, bloodied Nigerians, forced to run helter-skelter for safety, especially within the sacred grounds of a church on Sunday morning, leaves us in very little doubt that the Nigerian government and security authorities are simply not doing everything possible to stop the free range activities of the Boko Haram," the bishops said.

"There is a general feeling that the authorities know the truth, and those who back the terrorists, but lack the will to act," the bishops said. "We demand that something more concrete be done urgently to consolidate security, restore public confidence and salvage the very integrity of the Nigerian nation."

The bishops then added an ominous note: "Without this, individual Nigerians would have no choice but to defend themselves -- a dangerous option, no doubt."

Anyone who knows recent Nigerian history realizes that's far from a hollow threat.

When a previous wave of religious violence hit the country in the 1990s, armed Christian militias formed to defend churches. Evangelical Pastor James Wuye, a former militia leader who today runs an interfaith mediation center along with a Muslim imam, acknowledged in a 2005 interview that these armed Christian bands sometimes passed from defense to offense. He lost his own hand, he said, blowing up a bridge, an incident his group blamed on Muslims as a pretext for launching an assault.

Many observers believe Nigeria is headed in that direction again if the Boko Haram is not brought quickly

under control.

On Tuesday, I reached out to Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, the national capital, where a Christmas Day bombing of a Catholic parish left 35 dead. In a sign of the times, Onaiyekan told me that without turning his residence into an "armed camp," he has Catholic scouts and other volunteers working with police to check cars and visitors as they come and go out of fear the Boko Haram might target him, too.

I asked Onaiyekan what outsiders ought to understand about the current situation in Nigeria, and he made three basic points.

Training, not weapons or war

First, he said, Americans shouldn't be pushing for a massive military response in Nigeria along the lines of the anti-Taliban offensive in Afghanistan. Onaiyekan also said provision of additional weapons to the Nigerian military, at least the kind used to fight conventional wars, won't do much good.

"The problem our government faces is not a lack of firepower," Onaiyekan said. "Our armed forces and police have plenty of weapons at their disposal, and when it comes to taking on the Boko Haram, they can always outshoot them."

Instead, he said, what the Nigerians could use is training of their security forces for targeted anti-terrorism interventions. The Nigerian military, he said, is more accustomed to peace-keeping operations and large-scale security operations.

Engage and challenge reasonable Muslims

Second, Onaiyekan said, Westerners should not assume that "the battle lines in Nigeria have been drawn between Christians and Muslims," because, he said, "that's not so."

In reality, he said, reasonable Nigerian Muslims understand that calls for Islamic law in the country are "impossible and impractical" and have condemned Boko Haram radicalism.

At the same time, he said, "it's not yet clear to what extent Muslim elites in northern Nigeria" may be passively encouraging the violence, largely as a means of destabilizing the current national government of President Goodluck Jonathan, which some in the north see as hostile to their interests.

On that score, Onaiyekan said two things need to be done.

First, the Nigerian government needs to reach out to civic and political leaders in the north, to convince them they're part of the national compact. Second, he said, Muslim leaders need to do more than speak out against the violence. Among other things, they should encourage their people to identify the instigators of the violence and to report them to security forces.

Onaiyekan said the Catholic bishops of Nigeria have issued a blunt challenge to the country's Muslim leadership: "The House of Islam in this country must get its house in order," he said.

Long-term development

Over the long haul, Onaiyekan said, the best anti-terrorist strategy is to promote good government, including anti-corruption measures that could lead to a greater share of Nigeria's vast resources being invested in basic public services such as education, health care and economic development.

Large pools of uneducated and unemployed youth, he said, especially in the Muslim north, are the best sources of new recruits for the radicals.

Finally, Onaiyekan urged outsiders not to allow perceptions of Nigeria to be shaped exclusively by sensational incidents of violence, which he described as still "sporadic and isolated."

"Last Sunday, thousands of churches all over Nigeria had peaceful services," he said. "I honestly believe consensus is still possible, because it's what most Nigerians, Christians and Muslims truly want."

What Americans can do

On a practical note, I reached out to Fr. Patrick Alumuku, spokesperson for the Abuja archdiocese and part of a working group for a new Catholic news agency in Africa, to ask what American Catholics could do to help.

"Many people have fled from Muslim-dominated northern cities and have been heading down to the Christian south areas," Alumuku said. "People need to be helped to resettle. Catholic Relief Services could help here."

"Many churches have also been destroyed which need to be rebuilt," he said. "Families which have lost their bread-winners are in distress."

Most basically, Alumuku said, Nigerian Christians would like to hear "a message of solidarity among all Christians in the face of this Muslim assault."

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It's a never-ending source of amazement to some secular observers that there's actually Catholic life to the right of the pope and the Vatican. Yet on many non-doctrinal issues, the Vatican is actually caught between competing ideological pressures at the grassroots and usually tries -- admittedly, with varying degrees of success -- to strike a balance.

Take China, for instance. Both within the Chinese church and among outside observers who take an interest in China, Catholic opinion has long been divided into two broad camps we can loosely call "hawks" and "doves."

Hawks take a hard line on relations with the communist government and are alert for any sign of softness on Catholic identity to placate the regime. Doves support dialogue and compromise, rejecting the idea that the church has a vocation to change the country's political system, and tend to be more indulgent about the choices individual Catholics have made to survive in a hostile environment.

One of the under-reported stories from the February consistory, in which Pope Benedict XVI created 22 new cardinals, is that when it comes to China, Rome has basically sided with the doves.

That's because among the pope's new princes of the church was Cardinal John Tong of Hong Kong, just the seventh Chinese cardinal, and a clear break in both tone and substance with his predecessor, Cardinal Joseph Zen. Where the fiery Zen has long been the voice of the hawks, Tong comes off as a more dovish figure.

Now 72, Tong hails from a Hong Kong family that fled to Macao at the time of the Japanese invasion in 1941. His mother was the first Catholic in the family, and Tong was educated by Maryknoll missionaries. He went to Rome to study in 1964, while the Second Vatican Council was still under way, and was ordained a priest by Pope Paul VI in 1966.

Tong is now one of three Chinese cardinals, but the only one under 80 and therefore eligible to vote for the next

pope.

Recently Tong gave an interview to Gianni Valente of the widely read Italian magazine *30 Giorni* in which Tong defined himself as a "moderate" who believes "it is better to be patient and open to dialogue with everyone, even the communists."

"Certainly the church is not a political entity," Tong said. "It's not really our problem or our goal to change the political systems. And moreover, in our case, it would be quite impossible to do so."

To be sure, Tong said there are some non-negotiable principles, beginning with the requirement that bishops and priests must be in communion with Rome and ordained according to church law rather than government fiat. At the same time, he called for friendship rather than isolation of those in irregular situations, and distanced himself from hawkish voices who publicly impugn the Catholic credentials of clergy and laity they see as co-opted by the government.

"Fraternal correction," Tong pointedly said, "is made through dialogue, not through Internet attacks."

Tong's own experience has taught him that choices that at the time seem dubious could later be seen in a new light. In 1985, he attended the ordination of Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai, which took place without Rome's blessing and left Jin an illegitimate figure in the eyes of most hawks. Yet seven years ago, Jin's requests to be recognized by Rome were granted, and today many observers see Shanghai as the beachhead of a dynamic form of urban Chinese Catholicism. (Jin's motto is that the "old church appealed to 3 million Catholics -- I want to appeal to 100 million Catholics.")

Here is Tong's philosophy about how Catholics ought to react to fellow believers forced to make hard choices.

"We cannot fix on a single point, cannot attempt to review every decision, and expect that every action and every decision made by members of the church in China are always perfect in every moment and every situation," Tong said. "If each error is isolated and becomes a reason for condemnation without appeal, who can be saved? It is in the long run that you see whether a priest or bishop has a good intention in his heart."

With Italian Cardinal Fernando Filoni now in charge of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, who comes out of the world of Vatican diplomacy, Rome's China policy seems securely in the hands of the moderates.

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