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In the Vatican, did the butler really do it?

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 4, 2012

Paolo Gabriele is seen at left in the popemobile in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican May 2. (CNS/Paul Haring)

In Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven," the narrator yearns for a "surcease of sorrow" for his lost Lenore. It's an apt allusion to open a report on the Vatican these days, gripped by scandals surrounding leaked documents, the abrupt firing of a Vatican Bank president once hailed as a great reformer, and the arrest of the pope's butler.

In Italian, the presumed gang of insiders behind the leaks is known as *corvi*, which can be translated either as "crows" or "ravens."

"The events of recent days involving the Curia and my collaborators have brought sadness to my heart," Pope Benedict XVI said at the end of his general audience May 30 -- and thus, presumably, looking for some surcease himself. It was the first time the pope spoke publicly of the events.

Depending on whom one asks, the authors of the present chaos may be:

- Courageous whistle-blowers, determined to bring secrets to light;
- Petty bureaucrats, waging tawdry turf wars;
- Admirers of Benedict who believe the current regime around the pope must go, willing to destroy the village in order to save it.

Whatever the case, the cascade of recent events has been so surreal one scarcely knows where to begin.

What's known as the "Vatileaks" scandal erupted in January, when Italian journalist Gianluigi Nuzzi revealed confidential letters from Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, today the pope's ambassador in Washington, alleging corruption and cronyism in the Vatican City State, such as overpaying for the annual nativity set and awarding contracts on the basis of patronage rather than competitive bids.

More leaks followed, including documents from both the Vatican Bank and a new Financial Information Authority created by Benedict, supposedly to ensure transparency and accountability. Internal memoranda exposed doubts that the structure, especially in light of revisions to its rules earlier this year, would actually work.

Still other leaks included memos about the opening of a mobster's tomb in a Roman basilica, because the mobster is rumored to have been involved in the 1983 disappearance of a teenage girl whose family lived in the Vatican (the inspection was eventually approved), and letters about an attempted Vatican takeover of an Italian Catholic university and hospital.

A seeming crescendo came with publication of an anonymous memo outlining an almost Borgia-esque plot to kill Benedict, purportedly discussed by an Italian cardinal over a business dinner in Beijing.

Individually, no single leak may have been a bombshell (and the alleged murder plot seemed downright silly), but collectively they created impressions of an institution in crisis. Internal investigations were launched, but failed to identify any culprits.

Things heated up anew in mid-May, when Nuzzi, the journalist who started it all, published a sensational book titled *His Holiness: The Secret Papers of Benedict XVI*. It collected previously leaked material and added new documents. Some apparently had never left the papal apartment, which allowed investigators to narrow their focus to the handful of people with access.

That, in turn, led to a stunner on May 23: the arrest of Paolo Gabriele, a 46-year-old Italian layman who has worked as papal valet since 1998. A search of Gabriele's Vatican apartment reportedly turned up confidential documents as well as reproduction equipment.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, has said that Vatican gendarmes detained Gabriele, that he had chosen two lawyers to represent him before the Vatican's small criminal tribunal, and that he faces a charge of "aggravated theft." Gabriele's lawyers have said he is "fully cooperating" with the investigation.

Among many Vatican-watchers, the claim "the butler did it" has drawn palpable skepticism.

"It's obvious that the butler is just a pawn in this case," wrote longtime Vatican writer Bruno Bartoloni in *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's leading daily.

Bartoloni asserted that likely architects of the affair range "from a cardinal to a group of bishops, someone who was fed up with what was going on around the pope and the central government of the church."

Lombardi denied that any cardinal is under investigation, but said the inquiry would continue -- leaving open the possibility that other culprits may emerge.

Beyond who's involved, the other $64,000 question is motive.

In his book, Nuzzi refers to his chief source under the code name "Maria," describing the person as a conduit for insiders who "love the church" and believe its secrets need to see the light of day. So far, Nuzzi has refused to comment on whether Gabriele is "Maria," saying only that the source works in the Vatican.

Others believe there's a political subtext to the leaks. According to this view, the ultimate aim is to undercut Benedict's top aide, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's secretary of state, in effect the pope's prime minister.

Among those convinced Bertone is the target, one school holds that the animosity springs from the tribal rivalries of Italian ecclesiastical culture, and therefore has little to do with ideas or competing priorities for the church.

Another school, however, says there is a broader clash of vision in play. According to this logic, the leakers are insiders convinced that while Benedict has called for renewal and purification, Bertone is an agent of the status quo. The idea would be to compel Benedict to remove Bertone, despite the pope's repeated signals of friendship and support for the 77-year-old Salesian prelate.

On May 28, the Italian paper *La Stampa* carried a front-page interview with an unnamed Vatican official claiming to be among the leakers, who insisted, "There are many of us."

The official said the anti-Bertone campaign began last summer, when it became clear that Viganò would be removed from his Vatican post and shipped off to Washington.

"We understood then that the pope had not succeeded at controlling Bertone, and we decided to act," the source said, insisting, "We want to help the pope clean things up."

Meanwhile, Benedict used his May 30 general audience "to reiterate my trust and encouragement to my closest collaborators and to all those people who every day, in silent faithlessness and with a spirit of sacrifice, help me carry out my ministry."

He also blamed the media for blowing the scandal out of proportion, saying the media coverage "is entirely gratuitous, goes beyond the facts and presents a completely unrealistic image of the Holy See."

As that drama plays out, the Vatican also faces a fresh crisis in the Institute for Works of Religion, the so-called "Vatican Bank," after its supervisory council announced in late May that they had lost confidence in President Ettore Gotti Tedeschi, effectively meaning that he's fired.

The council is composed of four laymen, including Carl Anderson, supreme knight of the Knights of Columbus. In theory, a commission of cardinals that governs the bank in the pope's name could overturn the decision, but that's regarded as a long shot.

A well-known economist and devout Catholic who advised Benedict on his social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Gotti Tedeschi was hired in 2009. Spokesmen at the time presented him as the new architect of Benedict's fiscal glasnost, the ideal man to lead Vatican finances into the 21st century.

At least publicly, that confidence even survived news in 2010 that Italian authorities had placed both Gotti Tedeschi and the bank's manger, layman Paolo Cipriani, under investigation as a result of two transactions flagged as "suspicious" under anti-money-laundering protocols.

Bank personnel, however, have long whispered that Gotti Tedeschi's performance never matched his public image. They complain that he rarely showed up (by his own admission, he came only twice a week), that he seemed more interested in talking to reporters than in doing his job, and that he had a contentious relationship with the staff.

Many of those charges appeared in a confidential May 24 memo from Anderson to Gotti Tedeschi outlining the reasons for the no-confidence vote -- a memo that was, naturally, quickly leaked to the press.

Initially, some connected Gotti Tedeschi to the leaks scandal, in part because earlier revelations included emails from his personal account. Gotti Tedeschi has denied being among the "ravens," and Vatican officials insist his ouster was related solely to job performance.

In terms of process, veteran Italian journalist Marco Tosatti described the removal of Gotti Tedeschi as the "first lay coup" in the history of the Vatican Bank.

The supervisory council pulled the rug out from under Bertone, Tosatti reported, because Bertone was open to a face-saving compromise. By going public swiftly, he wrote, Anderson and the other council members closed off that option.

Between the shakeup at the bank and the leaks scandal, most observers see the latter as the Vatican's far more serious problem. Italian Archbishop Angelo Becciu, the "substitute" of the pope and thus the Vatican's chief of staff, recently admitted that when he looks colleagues in the eyes these days, he sees "dismay and anxiety."

By nature, the Vatican is an institution that runs on personal relationships and trust, and the scandal has called that trust into question.

One measure of how tense things have become is that several important news outlets, including *Bild* in Germany and *il Giornale* in Italy, have called on Benedict to step down, arguing that only such a dramatic step can save the situation.

To that, veteran Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli, who has been among the leading voices pointing to a broader conspiracy behind the leaks scandal, offered this reply: "Benedict XVI is the last person who ought to resign in the Vatican at the moment."

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