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Reflections on the 'butler did it' verdict

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NCR Today

After a Vatican court on Saturday sentenced former papal butler Paolo Gabriele to 18 months of detention for being the mole at the heart of the Vatican leaks scandal, my friend and colleague Marco Ansaldo of *La Repubblica* asked me for some brief reactions which appeared in the Sunday edition of the paper.

The following is the English version of the four points I gave Ansaldo, which ran under the headline 'The Battle for Transparency Stands Halfway.'

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First, the Gabriele trial and the whole Vatileaks scandal is not comparable to the sexual abuse crisis or the Holocaust-denying bishop case in terms of public opinion, at least outside Italy. Frankly, most Americans have no idea what the scandal is about, they haven't read Nuzzi's book or followed the leaks closely, and they find the idea of the pope's butler being under arrest more comical than alarming.

This is a unique scandal in that the damage is greater internally. Inside the Vatican itself, it created a crisis of trust that has not really been resolved by the trial or the verdict. Personnel are now more reluctant to share confidences, and bishops around the world are hesitant to put anything on paper or to discuss their problems with Vatican officials for fear that it might be leaked or misused. In other words, this is a scandal that strikes more at the inner workings of the Church than its public image.

Second, it seems clear that the trial has not answered all the questions surrounding the case. Those questions include not only whether others were involved in the leaks, but what exactly Gabriele meant by saying there is a climate of 'widespread unease' inside the Vatican? what are people uneasy about, which people share those feelings, is the pope aware, and what does he plan to do about it? The core issue of whether the current regime around Benedict XVI is truly up to the challenge of administering a

universal church in the 21st century have not been, and really could not be, resolved by the trial.

Third, it's ironic that the verdict comes just one day before opening of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, because the images sometimes projected by the Vatican — power struggles, palace intrigue, corruption and cover-ups — are arguably among the most serious obstacles to evangelization faced by the contemporary Church.

Benedict XVI has repeatedly called the church to a new path of transparency, but it's not clear that the outcome of the trial will strike most reasonable people as truly transparent. No one doubts that "the butler did it," but it does not seem that the trial provided much latitude for pursuing other important questions. For instance, Gabriele claimed that he acted because the pope seemed not to be aware of some important matters, suggesting that things were being concealed or at least kept away from Benedict XVI. Is that true? We still don't know, and I suspect many people would like to know.

Fourth, one fascinating question now is: What becomes of Paolo Gabriele? Once he's finished serving eighteen months of house arrest, or after a pardon from the pope (whichever comes first), will he be free to talk about his experiences publicly? Will he get a book deal and make the rounds of TV talk shows, like other minor celebrities of all stripes these days? Will he talk openly about the things he saw, heard and experienced during his years at the pope's side, sharing his most intimate moments?

In other words, will he become the creature that all power structures fear most — the rogue insider? In any event, it's probably a mistake to believe that with this sentence, the world has heard the last of Paolo Gabriele.

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