

## A global crop of cardinals; Syria; Vatileaks; and possible popes

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 26, 2012 All Things Catholic  
Synod of Bishops 2012

One could argue that in its strong focus on Western secularism, the papacy of Benedict XVI has been somewhat Eurocentric. When that case is made, however, the consistory of Nov. 24 will have to be recorded as a counter-example.

This will be Benedict's fifth crop of new cardinals, and for the first time, there's not a single European in the bunch. Granted, there are only six total, but most observers still expected a couple of guys from the old continent -- for instance, German Archbishop Gerhard Müller, the new prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, or Rino Fisichella, an Italian and president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization.

Instead, Benedict announced he would hold a consistory one month hence that includes only one Westerner: Archbishop James Harvey, a Milwaukee native, following 14 years as prefect of the Papal Household. The pope said he plans to name Harvey as archpriest of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls.

The other five come from the developing world: one each from the Middle East, Latin America and Africa, and two from Asia. In that sense, November's consistory reflects the rise of a "world church" in which leadership will increasingly come from the southern hemisphere.

Immediately, the consistory would seem to elevate two figures into the ranks of the *papabili*, meaning candidates to be pope:

- Luis Antonio Tagle, 55, of Manila in the Philippines
- John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan, 68, of Abuja in Nigeria

Tagle is widely considered one of the most impressive Asian bishops, popular among both the young and the media, two constituencies the church is desperately trying to reach. Onaiyekan is a boisterous and outspoken figure who incarnates the dynamism of the African church. He doesn't see himself as a junior partner in a multinational enterprise, but as a leader of the most rapidly growing and energetic Catholic community on the planet.

Both Tagle and Onaiyekan have impressed people at the current Synod of Bishops. Tagle called for a humbler, simpler church with a greater capacity for silence, while Onaiyekan restored some balance on Islam. He insisted that despite the rise of Boko Haram, "Christians in Nigeria do not see themselves as being under any massive persecution by Muslims."

(I confess that Onaiyekan is a longtime friend and my go-to guy on issues in the African church. He hosted Shannon and me in Abuja when I was working on *The Future Church*, becoming my Jewish wife's favorite African prelate.)

As for Harvey, many Italian observers believe he's being moved out of the Papal Household as part of the fallout from the Vatileaks affair. That may be, though a note of caution: Vatileaks is a national obsession in Italy, so everything that happens in the Vatican these days is seen through that lens, whether related or not.

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At times, the Vatican seems to have a genius for snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, taking what ought to have been a positive storyline and turning it into something less. That was the case with the peace mission to Syria announced Oct. 16 by the Synod of Bishops, which quickly fell apart and left behind the impression of a diplomatic embarrassment.

The idea was to express closeness to the suffering of Syria and a desire for peace, not just on behalf of the Vatican but all the world's bishops. In a particular way, it was to offer a shot in the arm to Syria's 2.3 million Christians, who fear their country will be the next Iraq, the next place where a historic Christian community is gutted.

In fairness, the Vatican can't be blamed for a spike in violence last weekend, which began with the assassination of Lebanon's intelligence chief and climaxed with car bombs in Christian sectors of Damascus and Aleppo. Nor can the Vatican be faulted for the difficulties of dealing with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, which hoped to exploit the delegation for propaganda purposes, styling itself as the great defender of Syria's minorities against Islamic radicalism.

However, violence and truculence are predictable when dealing with Syria, which means you don't announce a mission to the country unless you have a plan for dealing with both. What's become clear is that the Vatican never had one, leaving most observers with the impression that good intentions had overwhelmed sound judgment.

On Tuesday, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, basically backtracked, saying the delegation probably won't depart before the end of the synod Sunday, and its composition will probably change before it ever happens.

It's striking that Bertone's statement wasn't accompanied by announcement of another gesture designed to achieve the same aims. For instance, Bertone could have said that because the bishops can't get to Syria, they'll bring Syria to them -- that the seven members of the delegation (which included Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York), along with Pope Benedict XVI, are inviting leaders from Syria and Lebanon to Rome on Monday for a special "Prayer for Peace" and that all 300 participants in the Synod of Bishops have been asked to delay their departures for one day as an expression of solidarity.

By not doing that or something similar, Bertone let the delegation's collapse stand as the headline and missed a chance to send a signal that the Vatican and the synod aren't giving up.

That said, let's keep our eyes on the prize: The important question is not who's taken a black eye in terms of PR, but what the church can do on behalf of Syria, especially its vulnerable Christians.

Fortunately, there's something practical to suggest. The Catholic Near East Welfare Association -- among the largest the providers of aid to Christians in Syria, if not the largest -- has launched an emergency appeal to help Christian refugees get through the winter. The idea is to deliver "Winter Survival Kits" to 2,000 families at a cost of \$210 each.

Issam Bishara, a representative of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association in Lebanon, told me Monday that

because Syria's Christians generally have not headed for massive refugee camps in Turkey or Jordan, they're not getting help from international relief agencies. Fearing exposure to further hostility, they've headed to other parts of Syria and to Lebanon, taking refuge with families and friends, but in many cases, those folks are running out of food, water, heating oil and other supplies.

Bottom line: Without help, it's likely to be a long, cold and deadly winter.

Readers wishing to support the CNEWA appeal can find information and an online donation form [here](#) [1].

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The Synod of Bishops on new evangelization draws to a close Sunday after three weeks of deliberations. As this column was written, the bishops were still debating the final propositions. Fortunately, Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., offered a helpful rundown in [his daily blog](#) [2] from the synod.

For the most part, they're predictable based on the synod's discussions -- calls for strengthening the parish, the family and outreach to youth, for instance -- but vague enough that they don't immediately point to dramatic new initiatives.

Every now and then, however, a synod generates a concrete idea that actually has teeth. The 1985 synod on the 20th anniversary of Vatican II, for instance, came up with the notion of publishing a universal Catholic catechism. Work started a year later, and the catechism rolled out in 1992.

One candidate to be the breakthrough of the 2012 synod is a proposition calling for creation of a new global body of cardinals and other prelates to promote religious freedom around the world.

As [I reported Tuesday](#) [3], the idea was floated by English-speaking figures at the synod such as Cardinals George Pell of Sydney, Australia, and Dolan. According to Pell, it quickly attracted strong support from other quarters, including the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

As is well known, the U.S. bishops established an Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Liberty last September, designed to fight what they see as a growing set of church/state battles. Although opinion on that effort may be divided, there's no question the bishops are serious about it, and in many ways, the committee has become the engine driving the policy-setting train within the conference.

The dream for this new global body is that it could play a similar role for the universal church, moving the ball on far more lethal and direct threats to Christians and people of other faiths in a growing number of global hotspots. The stark reality is that we are witnessing the rise of a new generation of Christian martyrs in the early 21st century, estimated at 150,000 every year, and if defending these people can't engage the unified energies of the church -- left, right and center -- it's not clear anything ever could.

To be sure, there's concern among some bishops that this new body could devolve into a vehicle for chest-thumping and provocation, especially in regards to Islam.

"We can't just wade in there and bang the table and say we demand this, this and this," said Bishop Kieran Conry of Arundel and Brighton in a session with reporters Tuesday. "There are all sorts of cultural sensitivities within other religious groups."

That said, virtually everyone concedes this is a real issue and something needs to be done.

In [an interview with NCR](#) [4], Pell said the details are still to be worked out -- whether this new body will be based in Rome, for instance, and if so, under whose aegis. (The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the

Secretariat of State have both been mentioned.) It's also not clear who would sit on it, though the clear desire would be to include bishops from the most heavily affected zones, beginning with the Middle East.

Of course, this new body may never get off the ground or it could stall out as just another bureaucratic dead-end. Yet if it's launched with verve and commitment, it could be a game-changer.

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On the lecture circuit, I have a favorite joke to capture the slow pace at which the wheels grind in the Vatican: "If you hear that the end of the world is coming, head for Rome, because it will get here last."

By implication, the converse is also true: If something does arrive in Rome, you can usually take it to the bank that it's already crested elsewhere.

That bit of wisdom comes to mind in light of a conference Wednesday at Rome's University of the Holy Cross on transparency and accountability in the administration of the church's money, sponsored by Opus Dei. In effect, the conference is a signal that the push for greater transparency, which has already become "best practice" in many parts of the world, is now becoming conventional wisdom in Rome, too.

During a speech I gave last week to an international meeting of Carmelites, I argued that financial transparency would be among the mega-trends in the church in the 21st century for three reasons.

- In the West, the fallout of the child sexual abuse scandals has left many bishops afraid that financial misconduct will be round two of the sex abuse crisis.
- In the developing world, the fight against corruption in the political and economic sectors, often aided and abetted by Western interests, is the top social justice priority of many bishops, theologians and lay activists who know the church can't credibly oppose corruption if it's seen as corrupt itself.
- In Rome, Benedict XVI has launched a far-reaching financial reform, including creating a new watchdog agency and opening the Vatican to outside secular scrutiny with the explicit aim of also sending a signal to the rest of the church about the need for transparency and accountability.

That point was echoed at the Santa Croce conference by Fr. Daniel Mahan, director of the O'Meara Ferguson Center for Catholic Stewardship at the Marian University of Indianapolis, who said that case for transparency rests on two pillars.

First, he said, transparent and responsible administration of the church's temporal goods causes those assets to grow. "That's not a miracle, but a simple fact of life," he said.

Second, he argued, "when the members of the church, especially the laity, have a clear and accurate understanding of the temporal realities of the church they love, they're much more likely to support the church and its mission."

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On Wednesday, journalist Enzo Romeo, who covers the Vatican for Italy's Tg2 television network, launched his new book, *Guerre Vaticane* ("Vatican Wars"), in a presentation across the street from the Vatican Press Office in Rome's Ancora Bookstore.

The book was prompted by the Vatileaks affair, which lurched to a sort-of conclusion this week with the release of the sentence for Paolo Gabriele, the mole who passed rafters of confidential Vatican documents to Italian journalist Gianluigi Nuzzi.

Romeo has a reputation as a reliable reporter, and his book provides a useful tick-tock on the whole Vatileaks mess, beginning with the publication in early 2012 of two letters written by Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the former No. 2 official in the government of the Vatican City State and the current papal ambassador to Washington, D.C., about alleged corruption and cronyism in Vatican finances.

For those not gripped by the ins and outs of Vatileaks, the book also provides some broader perspective. At his presentation Wednesday, Romeo said he was struck by how the Vatican seems increasingly disconnected from the outside world.

"The Vatican is becoming increasingly self-referential," he said. "They argue, they discuss, they talk, thinking only of one another. They've lost a sense of contact with the people."

To break through that, Romeo floated an intriguing proposal. Cardinals, he observed, are all assigned Roman churches for which they're responsible, a reminder of the origins of cardinals as pastors in Rome. Today, he said, their relationship with those churches is mostly "heraldic" in the sense that one sees their coat of arms at the entrance but not much else. Maybe, he said, the cardinals could be asked to play some sort of pastoral role in those churches as way of restoring a direct relationship with ordinary people.

That's "not a utopia," Romeo insisted, "but a small step that could be taken" in the direction of a "post-war era in the Vatican," meaning a period beyond the internal conflicts revealed by the Vatileaks affair.

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For readers outside Italy, perhaps the most interesting aspect of Romeo's book is his run-down of those prelates he considers *papabili*, meaning contenders to be the next pope. Here's how he breaks down the field:

### Italians

1. Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan (whom Romeo clearly believes to be at the head of the pack)
2. Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco of Genoa, president of the Italian bishops' conference
3. Archbishop Francesco Moraglia of Venice (not yet a cardinal, but a favorite of the more traditionalist wing of the church)
4. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture (Romeo concedes that Ravasi is an intellectual without pastoral experience and asks whether after Benedict XVI, "Can the church permit itself another professor?")

### Non-Italians

1. Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Canada, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops
2. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria
3. Cardinal Peter Erdö of Budapest, Hungary
4. Cardinal Philippe Barbarin of Lyon, France
5. Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York
6. Cardinal Odilo Pedro Scherer of São Paulo, Brazil
7. Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace
8. Cardinal Robert Sarah of Guinea, president of the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum"

As a footnote, Romeo wrote the book before Turkson seemingly diminished his chances by [playing an anti-Muslim video](#) [5] during the evangelization synod, a presentation criticized by bishops from several parts of the word for being alarmist and inaccurate.

As for Dolan, Romeo calls him "a conservative with a charismatic personality," saying that "those who don't know him well are struck by his good-natured personality and open smile."

Yet Romeo adds: "His sweet tone shouldn't deceive anyone. Dolan is sly (including in self-promotion, according to critics) but determined ... as president of bishops' conference in the United States, he's undertaken a battle to the last drop of blood against the Obama administration."

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Finally, on an insider note, Romeo says something out loud that I've often thought about: The Vatileaks story was not broken by the *vaticanisti*, meaning journalists specialized in Vatican coverage, but by Nuzzi, an outsider to the world of the Holy See. That's all the more striking given that Gabriele, the papal butler who leaked the documents, actually knew many people in the Vatican press corps.

Romeo wonders aloud whether the *vaticanisti* didn't want to bite the hand that feeds them, meaning they're inclined to pull their punches, or whether their sense of responsibility prevented them from pursuing stories they knew would be overhyped and misunderstood. He calls that "an open question."

(For the record, I'm usually classified as a *vaticanista* myself, so the foregoing reflection also applies to me.)

In any event, Romeo said Wednesday, it's a fact that supposed specialists on the Vatican beat were largely "bypassed" on what turned out to be the most sensational Vatican story of recent years.

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