

Top five under-covered Vatican stories of 2012

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 4, 2013 All Things Catholic

Now that the dust has settled on the New Year's holiday, it's time for my annual run-down of the most under-covered Vatican stories. By that, I mean those stories that fell through the cracks in the last year or that didn't quite generate the buzz they really deserved.

To be clear, this is not a countdown of the most important Vatican storylines. That list would certainly include the arrest, trial, conviction and eventual pardon of papal butler Paolo Gabriele and the crackdown by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Both stories, however, were abundantly covered throughout the year. In a similar fashion, the Synod of Bishops on new evangelization and the Year of Faith didn't get a lot of traction in the secular press, but the Vatican's communications channels routinely beat the drum on them during 2012.

Instead, this is a run-down of five stories that made a brief appearance on the radar at some point but, for a variety of reasons, faded before their real importance could be adequately appreciated.

Here, then, are the top five Vatican storylines from 2012 that deserve another moment in the sun.

5. The sex abuse summit

In early February, Rome's Jesuit-run Gregorian University staged a major international summit on the sex abuse crisis, titled "Toward Healing and Renewal," in tandem with several Vatican departments. It brought together roughly 100 bishops and religious superiors from around the world ahead of a May deadline from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for bishops' conferences to submit their anti-abuse policies.

The big picture was that the old debates in the Vatican regarding the crisis are finished and the reformers have won.

When the scandals in the United States broke a decade ago, reaction in the Vatican was clearly divided between what one might loosely call the "reformers" and the "deniers." The fault lines broke down in terms of these sorts of debates:

- Is the crisis largely a media- and lawyer-driven frenzy, or is it a real cancer?
- Should the church cooperate fully with civil authorities, or is that surrendering the autonomy the church has fought titanic battles over the centuries to defend?
- Should the church embrace the use of psychology in screening candidates for the priesthood, or is that smuggling in a secular mentality in place of traditional spiritual principles of formation?
- Should the church support aggressive programs of abuse prevention and detection, or does that risk "sexualizing" children along the lines of secular sex education?
- Is the crisis truly a global phenomenon, or is it the fruit of a "moral panic" largely restricted to the West?
- Should the Vatican sign off on "zero-tolerance" policies, or does that rupture the paternal relationship that's supposed to exist between a bishop and his priests?

The Gregorian conference confirmed that those debates are finished, as the Vatican's most senior officials repeatedly weighed in in favor of reform positions on the questions listed above. Some of the deniers may still be around, but they've been driven underground.

To be sure, the conference also confirmed that the response to the crisis remains a work in progress. Several speakers acknowledged that holding bishops accountable is still a challenge -- a tension neatly illustrated by the United States, where Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City, Mo., remains in office despite becoming the first bishop criminally convicted of failure to report a charge of child abuse.

Nonetheless, the Gregorian symposium showed the Vatican has moved a considerable distance in a decade.

4. The Vatican and Syria

It may be one measure of the difference between John Paul II and Benedict XVI that nobody seems to have noticed the Vatican has yet to offer a coherent line on the Syrian crisis, especially the crucial question of whether international intervention would be justified to protect the civilian population.

John Paul II helped coin the phrase "humanitarian intervention" to argue for the use of force in the Balkans in the early 1990s, and he was the biggest moral opponent of the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq in 2003. In both cases, people paid careful attention because John Paul had a proven capacity to drive opinion. Benedict XVI is seen as less politically consequential, so perhaps it's natural that people are less focused on the Vatican's diplomatic line.

In any event, it largely escaped attention in 2012 that the Vatican has said shifting and nebulous things about Syria and that its efforts to get involved were occasionally ham-handed and amateurish.

In June, the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, quoted the pope's ambassador as saying the country is experiencing a "slow descent into hell," but also called the prospect of armed international intervention "very worrying." In September, Msgr. Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, a Colombian and the No. 2 official at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, outlined the Vatican's position on Syria during an Istanbul conference:

- An immediate end to violence "from whatever part"
- Dialogue "as the necessary path to respond to the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people"
- Preserving the unity of the Syria "regardless of ethnicity and religious affiliation"
- An appeal to the international community to commit itself to a peace process

That statement still left key questions unanswered, such as whether the Vatican believes the government of President Bashar al-Assad should stay or go and whether an armed international response would be warranted to impose a cease-fire.

Throughout the year, the Vatican's ambivalence was tweaked in various quarters.

A leading Turkish daily called the pope's line "elusive." A well-known Italian Jesuit who spent 30 years in Syria, Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, lampooned the unwillingness to support international intervention. If the Vatican doesn't believe foreign troops have a role to play in keeping the peace, Dall'Oglio asked, what are the Swiss Guards doing in St. Peter's Square?

During the Synod of Bishops in October, the Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, dramatically announced the synod would dispatch a high-level delegation to Syria consisting of five senior

prelates representing each continent, including Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York. It was a powerful expression of the concern of the universal church, not to mention a precedent that a synod can do more than talk.

It quickly became clear, however, that the Vatican hadn't done its homework. They didn't know how the delegation would get into the country, or who they'd meet once they arrived. The plug was pulled just 48 hours after the announcement, leaving behind a residue of embarrassment.

No doubt, the pope and his Vatican team have their hearts in the right place. They're deeply concerned about Syria, especially the fate of its Christian minority. It remains to be seen in 2013, however, whether those good intentions can be matched with effective diplomatic action.

3. Benedict the cosmopolitan

Benedict XVI has been characterized as a deeply "Eurocentric" pontiff, and in some ways that's probably true, perhaps especially in his tight focus on secularism as the pre-eminent danger facing the faith in the early 21st century.

If all one had to judge by was the pope's itinerary in 2012, however, the case for Eurocentrism would be much harder to make.

Consider that the pope made only two foreign trips in the last year, and neither took him to a European destination. He visited Mexico and Cuba in March, laying out a pastoral strategy for the church in Latin America during the Mexican component and engaging in some post-Castro diplomacy while in Cuba. He then visited Lebanon in September, providing a vision for the church in the Middle East.

Consider too that Benedict held two consistories, the event in which a pope creates new cardinals, in 2012. The first, in February, was a rather conventional affair -- 12 of the 18 new voting age cardinals were Europeans, and 10 were Vatican officials. There were, however, also new cardinals from China and India, the two emerging new superpowers of the 21st century.

Benedict's smaller consistory in November was remarkable because for the first time in living memory, there wasn't a single European in the bunch, and only one Westerner, American James Harvey. The other new princes of the church hailed from Lebanon, India, Nigeria, Colombia and the Philippines. At least two of those nominees seemed to have some real traction as possible papal candidates, Cardinals Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila and John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria.

In the early 21st century, more than two-thirds of the 1.2 billion Catholics on the planet live in the developing world, a share that's expected to reach three-quarters by mid-century. It always takes a while for the concerns at the top of the church to reflect its demographic realities on the ground, but 2012 may come to be seen as one of those moments when the wheels began to turn.

2. The 'what' of Vatileaks

The sexiest storyline out of the Vatican in 2012 was the Vatileaks scandal, fueling *Da Vinci Code*-style images of power struggles and palace intrigue. It also cemented impressions that the papacy of Benedict XVI may be a teaching triumph, but it's also something of an administrative mess, making it likely that governance will be a voting issue the next time the cardinals elect a pope.

Strikingly, it was the "who" and the "why" of Vatileaks that dominated attention as opposed to the "what": What exactly did we learn from the tidal wave of secret documents that flowed out of the Holy See?

In part, that's because some of these documents were either of minor importance or just downright silly. (Remember the alleged plot to kill the pope? Seriously, even if you're prepared to believe that a cardinal in the 21st century would plot to murder the pontiff, do you honestly think he'd discuss it over a business dinner in Beijing?)

Other documents, however, were far more serious and revealed some things well worth knowing.

For instance, we now know that Fr. Rafael Moreno, private secretary to the late Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, tried to inform Pope John Paul in 2003 about charges against Maciel, but the pope "didn't want to hear them, didn't believe." (Maciel was eventually sentenced in 2006 to a life of prayer and penance over acts of sexual and financial misconduct.)

We also know that a high-profile Italian journalist directly accused both the Cardinal Secretary of State and the editor of the Vatican newspaper of orchestrating a plot against him, which, he alleged, included falsifying a legal document. We know, too, that the leader of the Communion and Liberation movement wrote personally to the pope in March 2011 to accuse the two previous Archbishops of Milan, Cardinals Carlo Maria Martini and Dionigi Tettamanzi, of promoting a "rupture" in the faith and "a sort of 'alternative magisterium' to Rome and the Holy Father."

Perhaps most importantly, we learned that deep concerns circulated in the Vatican about financial mismanagement and corruption. The leaked documents include a lengthy memo from an unnamed official, presumably at the Prefecture for Economic Affairs, written in spring 2011. It ticks off a series of alleged problems, including ignoring the Vatican's own internal checks and balances, "demoralization" of personnel, and the appointment of people "who lack the adequate competence."

The conclusion is unequivocal:

"The problematic situations are numerous and of notable gravity, above all because they could have devastating effects in the future, even if they can't be seen right now and everything looks fine. My direct superiors, with whom I've spoken repeatedly, for now don't believe it's opportune to do anything. They say that our principal point of reference is the Secretary of State, yet in many cases he's precisely the problem. Conscience requires that I present these matters to the Holy Father."

In the Anglophone realm, deeper appreciation of the "what" of Vatileaks may have to await an English translation of the book *His Holiness: The Secret Papers of Benedict XVI*, published by journalist Gianluigi Nuzzi, the primary conduit for Gabriele's leaks.

1. Financial reform

Scandal has the tendency to breed reform, and even before the Vatileaks mess, there were important steps toward financial glasnost under Benedict XVI. Based on developments in 2012, obituaries of Benedict may have to be rewritten -- his papacy has had some serious administrative shortcomings, but he also arguably shapes up as a "great reformer" on two key fronts, the sex abuse crisis and finances.

Vis-à-vis finances, two developments from the last year lend credence to Benedict's profile as a reformer.

The first came in July, when the Vatican got the results of its first inspection for financial transparency by an independent secular body, in this case an outfit called Moneyval, the Council of Europe's anti-money-laundering agency. The verdict was a mixed bag, suggesting the Vatican "has come a long way in a very short period of time" toward transparency, but also raising questions about the role of the Vatican's new financial watchdog

agency and about oversight of the Institute for the Works of Religion, the so-called "Vatican Bank."

Specifics aside, the fact the Vatican was willing to undergo this test at all was a watershed. Never before has the Vatican opened its financial and legal systems to this sort of external, independent review with the results made public. In centuries past, had secular authorities shown up to conduct such a review, they would have been fought off tooth and nail in the name of defending the autonomy and sovereignty of the papacy. For Moneyval, the red carpet was rolled out instead.

Second, in September, the Vatican hired a 40-year-old Swiss lawyer named René Brülhart, who for the last 10 years had led anti-money-laundering efforts in the tiny European principality of Liechtenstein, as a consultant for its response to the Moneyval evaluation.

Brülhart brings an impeccable pedigree. He joined Liechtenstein's financial intelligence unit as deputy director in 2001, and took over the top job in 2004. Since 2010, he served as vice president of the Egmont Group, the global network of financial intelligence units, which are national-level bodies that coordinate the policing of transparency requirements.

Brülhart achieved brief fame in 2003 when he helped return a Falcon 50 business jet worth several million dollars to the new Iraqi government after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The plane had been grounded in Jordan shortly before the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, and it was registered to a shell company in Liechtenstein controlled by Hussein. Brülhart helped unravel the paper trail, and eventually the plane was returned -- the first case in which an asset held by Saddam outside Iraq was repatriated.

Not long after he arrived in the Vatican, Brülhart was reassigned as the new head of the "Financial Information Authority," the watchdog unit created by Benedict XVI to ride herd over other Vatican departments and to ensure compliance with global standards of transparency. It was a natural move, since the effectiveness of the Financial Information Authority was one of the central points of the Moneyval review.

In effect, the Brülhart hire was a way of telling financial experts and regulators that the Vatican is serious about getting its act together, since he's a known quantity in that world. It's also a way of "de-Italianizing" the financial operations of the Vatican by bringing in leadership with a more cosmopolitan formation and outlook.

Whether a sea change in accountability results from all this remains to be seen, but even the prospect of it ranks as the biggest untold story about the Vatican in 2012.

As a footnote, why didn't this momentum toward financial house-cleaning get the play it deserved? In part, perhaps, it didn't fit the normal media script of crisis and scandal. In part, too, it was muddied by confusing subplots, such as the firing in May of Ettore Gotti Tedeschi, the erstwhile Vatican Bank president, whose hire in 2009 was trumpeted as a major breakthrough. Even if it's true that Gotti Tedeschi proved to be an erratic and self-promotional disappointment, it's always tough to sort out the rights and wrongs of a personnel move.

However, failure to perceive that Benedict has moved the ball on financial reform is also due, in part, to the Vatican's customary inability to tell its own story. Despite Benedict's launch on Twitter and the debut of a "Pope App" for the iPhone and Android, the Vatican still struggles to navigate routine communications challenges. To this day, for instance, Brülhart still hasn't appeared at a Vatican news conference to answer questions about the transparency campaign, despite the fact that he's smart, articulate, multilingual and, in the eyes of most of the women I know in Rome, awfully handsome.

The Vatican's PR woes, however, are not among the under-covered stories of 2012 or any other year.

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My 98-year-old grandmother, Laura Hebert Frazier, went to her eternal rest on New Year's Eve. She had spent the last eight months in an assisted living facility near my wife and me in Denver after suffering a serious fall and breaking her hip in her beloved hometown of Hill City, Kan., in April.

Grandma will be buried out in western Kansas, taking her long-planned place next to her husband, my grandpa, Raymond, and her daughter, Ileene, my mom. Grandma was the last surviving member of my immediate family, and she will be missed.

I'll be out of commission for a little while as I deal with the funeral and the other logistics of her passing. I ask for prayers for my grandma and for her extended family and friends as we grieve the loss of a remarkable woman.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org [1].]

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