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Thoughts on the Vatican's 'gay lobby'

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 22, 2013 NCR Today
Benedict Resigns

I've received numerous requests to comment on the sensational story in an Italian newspaper Thursday suggesting the existence of a shadowy "gay lobby" in the Vatican, linking it to the prospect of blackmail and suggesting that such dark forces may have factored into Benedict XVI's decision to resign.

For what it's worth, I'll lay out my initial reaction here.

First of all, the paper that carried the story, *La Repubblica*, is not a scandal sheet. It's the largest circulation daily in the country, with a center-left editorial stance. It's sometimes critical of the church, but it's not the *National Enquirer*.

What makes the piece slightly hard to evaluate is that it was written by a journalist named Concita De Gregorio, who's not among *La Repubblica's* usual stable of Vatican writers. (Sometimes Italian papers will let somebody else author stories likely to ruffle feathers in the Vatican so their regular beat reporters don't have to face the fallout.)

As a rule of thumb, one should usually take unsourced speculation with a grain of salt, especially in the Italian papers. As I'm fond of saying, God love 'em, Italians have never seen a conspiracy theory they're not prepared to believe.

In terms of the story's specifics, I don't know whether it's accurate that a commission of three cardinals created by Benedict XVI to investigate the Vatican leaks affair, composed of Cardinals Julian Herranz Casado, Jozef Tomko and Salvatore De Giorgi, actually considered possible networks inside the Vatican based on sexual preference, but frankly, it would be a little surprising if they hadn't.

Here's why. In 2007, Msgr. Thomas Stenico in the Congregation for Clergy was suspended after being caught on hidden camera making contact with a young man posing as a potential "date" in gay-oriented chat rooms, then taking him back to his Vatican apartment. In 2010, a "Gentlemen of the Pope" named Angelo Balducci was caught in a wiretap trying to arrange sexual hookups through a Nigerian member of a Vatican choir. Both episodes were highly public and caused massive embarrassment.

In that context, it would seem odd if the cardinals didn't at least consider the possibility that somebody with a big secret to hide might be vulnerable to pressure to leak documents or spill the beans in other ways.

It also doesn't stretch credulity to believe there are still people in the system leading a double life, not just in terms of their sexual preference and activities, but possibly in other ways as well -- in terms of their financial interests, for example. Whether they form self-conscious cabals is open to question, but they may well naturally identify with each other, and it's not out of the realm of possibility that trying to chart such networks was part of what the three cardinals tried to do.

Among many cardinals, it's become a fixed point of faith that the Vatican is long overdue for a serious housecleaning, and certainly the furor unleashed by the *La Repubblica* piece is likely to strengthen that conviction.

Another news report Friday suggested Benedict XVI may authorize sharing the three cardinals' report with the other members of the college to help guide their deliberations about what, and who, the church needs to move forward.

However, it's probably a stretch to draw a straight line between all of this and Benedict's resignation. For the most part, one has to take the pope at his word: He's stepping aside because he's old and tired, not because of any particular crisis.

That said, I don't believe you can completely discount the cumulative impact of the various meltdowns over the last eight years on Benedict's state of mind. Read Benedict's anguished letter to the bishops of the world back in 2009, at the peak of the frenzy over the lifting of the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop, and it's crystal clear he was both pained by the criticism it generated and frustrated the Vatican hadn't handled the whole thing more effectively.

If you want to understand why Benedict is tired, in other words, part of it is because he knows that putting things right inside the Vatican will take a tremendous investment of administrative energy, which he doesn't feel he can supply, and which probably isn't in his skill set in any event.

No, Benedict didn't quit under the pressure of a "gay lobby." But the perceived disarray in the Vatican, which may well be one part perception and one part reality, probably made resignation look even better.

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