

Mother Tekla: the most powerful woman in Rome

Jason Berry | Jun. 15, 2013

Rome

If the leadership of American nuns is the vanguard of a progressive spirit up against the Vatican, Mother Tekla Famiglietti is a throwback to the past: an orthodox leader who learned the rules of the game and wields power in the all-male world of the Roman Curia.

The 75-year-old head of an international order and a staunch traditionalist, the Italian-born Mother Tekla has, for more than three decades, built a power base with considerable financial prowess.

She established a long relationship with Pope John Paul II and was among the small group in vigil at the papal apartment in the Apostolic Palace the night he died. Her relationship with Pope Benedict XVI was not as warm, and she was kept at a distance from the small circle Benedict called *La Famiglia* that was central to his daily life. It remains to be seen whether her connections in the Curia will yield access to Pope Francis. But few would disagree that she has already left a distinctive imprint at the Vatican and on the Catholic church.

As the abbess general of the Order of the Most Holy Savior of St. Bridget since 1979, she has cultivated global relationships with everyone from Fidel Castro to casino owners to further the goals of her order. She oversees a small empire of hotels, guesthouses and restaurants from Israel to India and from Darien, Conn., to Assisi, Italy, that bring in big revenue for her order. The media has taken Mother Tekla to task for exploiting nuns who clean, make beds and cook, but her order has also been widely praised for a bold, worldwide initiative against the trafficking of women. She is a unique and complex player in the global Catholic church, often referred to as "the most powerful woman in Rome."

One morning, Mother Tekla sat in the elegant, if understated, parlor of St. Bridget's House at Piazza Farnese in Rome, a few blocks from the Tiber River and a short walk to St. Peter's Square. She wore a gray habit, her broad face framed in a dark veil with the Brigittines' trademark metal strips, resembling a helmet shaped like a cross. There was a framed image of herself with John Paul II -- and another with her and Castro.

In a long and wide-ranging interview, she spoke in a demeanor that shifted from genial to a steel-hard seriousness, and she seemed to sum up the entire journey of her life, saying, "We are a tool for history, but the one who really acts is God."

"We used to euphemistically call her the popessa," said James Nicholson, a U.S. ambassador to the Holy See under President George W. Bush.

Nicholson credits her help on several initiatives, including organizational assistance on a 2002 sexual trafficking conference the embassy organized, with representatives from 39 countries.

"Mother Tekla has an unusual ability to ennoble others -- like cardinals and bishops," added Nicholson, who is now a Washington, D.C., attorney. "You'd see a lineup of red hats and this woman in a habit like a helmet, as they showed respect for her stature. Some people are born with good leadership."

Marco Politi, a veteran Vatican journalist and papal biographer, is blunter: "Mother Tekla is a power machine with high-ranking connections in the Curia."

"By donating to cardinals you help them in their good works -- such as supporting a home for young people," Politi said. "Of course you don't know for sure where the money is going. ... Money is a form of prestige and connections in the Curia."

Under Benedict's reign, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith investigated the American leadership of nuns, or the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, for pushing "radical feminist themes." Benedict was respectful of Mother Tekla, but her access to him has been much more limited than was her access to John Paul. Yet her presence in Rome is longstanding.

In an era when Western religious orders are shrinking, the Brigidines have 800 members and a remarkable growth rate of 4 percent, adding 30 women a year. Backed by politically conservative donors, the order also generates revenue through a far-flung network of religious homes that double as hotels, or high-end guesthouses, in Europe, Israel, the Philippines and 16 places in India. The paid lodgings are part of the Brigidine charm of "Christian hospitality."

It is also a form of religious capitalism.

The guesthouse on a Brigidine estate in Darien welcomes "members of all faiths ? for private retreats, rest or study." The estate's website describes the setting: "Nestled within hidden inlets of the Long Island Sound, the Vikingsborg Guest House offers a tranquil 10-acre manse ideal for meditative pleasure." It charges \$110 a night, which includes meals, or a \$45 day rate, lunch and dinner inclusive. The facility has low labor overhead with nuns vowed to poverty.

The Darien house pays taxes. The one in Rome is tax-exempt.

St. Bridget's House at Piazza Farnese charges 140 euros per night (about \$180), which includes breakfast, access to chapel, a distinct religious milieu, and optional meals in a dining room. Nuns in wimples and traditional habits serve tables and work in kitchens and front desks, reducing labor costs. The order runs houses in other countries the same way, including in Havana.

Mother Tekla met Castro in 2000 at the inauguration of President Vicente Fox in Mexico City. This was nearly three years after John Paul's historic trip to Cuba, which began a thaw in state-church tensions.

Castro allowed her to open a small convent. Mother Tekla's career hit its zenith in 2003 when she commemorated the fifth anniversary of the papal trip with a ceremony for another, larger Brigidine house in the colonial section of Havana.

Castro spoke at the event, which was televised on state broadcast.

"The Holy See regretted Castro's turning the opening ceremony into a propaganda opportunity, but is willing to grit its teeth," said a U.S. State Department intelligence cable made public through Wikileaks.

The Vatican hoped the event would spark "greater church access to the Cuban people," according to the cable. But Havana Cardinal Jaime Ortega -- who had recently issued a pastoral letter critical of the regime on human

rights -- boycotted the ceremony, feeling snubbed by the Vatican planning, according to the cable.

The cable said that Mother Tekla later told officials of the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See (under Ambassador Francis Rooney, who succeeded Nicholson) that she had asked Ortega for a convent site, but the cardinal could only offer one some distance out on a country road. She asked Castro; he pledged a building in Old Havana, the cable said. The cable states:

The renovation costs were covered by donations solicited by Tekla's order, and the Vatican's nunciature assisted with importing building materials and fittings usually hard to come by in Cuba. ... Mother Tekla herself told us that no special honors were accorded Castro at the opening ceremony, and that she invited him to the inauguration out of "charity" and Christian courtesy.

The cable summarizes the view of Msgr. Giorgio Lingua, an official in the Vatican foreign affairs ministry at the time:

Lingua agreed that Cardinal Ortega and the Cuban clergy had a legitimate beef with how Mother Tekla had organized the construction and inauguration of her convent (i.e. via direct communication with Castro and the pope rather than via the Cuban bishops). He admitted that the Holy See had not managed the event well, noting that Mother Tekla "is not controllable."

At a 2006 meeting with U.S. officials in Rome, reported in another cable now online, the abbess argued for lifting the Cuban embargo before Castro died. "Mother Tekla said she had been to Fidel's house many times" but on a recent trip Castro was "too weak and ill" to meet.

The Brigittines eventually established four houses in Cuba.

Tekla's move into Cuba capitalized on Castro's ties with John Paul and his tolerance of the church's social assistance to people on the edges of an economy no longer undergirded by the former Soviet Union. Moreover, Cuba's burgeoning tourist economy needed hotels.

Hostal Convent Santa Brigida in Havana has four and a half stars in TripAdvisor's ratings for international travelers. Among the plaudits posted, one calls it "a haven of peace and of comfortable sleep. The rooms are large with modern marble bathrooms. The breakfast included was delicious. And the location can't be beat. It's right in the middle of Old Havana."

All of this tracks the mission Mother Tekla inherited from her predecessor, who revived the order founded by the 14th-century St. Bridget of Sweden. After a dormancy of several centuries, the Brigittines were resurrected in 1911 by another Swede, Mother Mary Elizabeth Hesselblad. Mother Tekla remembers her from her early years in the convent. Hesselblad died in 1957 and John Paul beatified her in 2000.

Framed by Corinthian columns, St. Bridget's House is a four-story structure composed of adjacent buildings, which Pope Pius XI donated to the order in 1931. St. Bridget is said to have died on the premises.

Hesselblad spurred the order's mid-20th-century growth. She cultivated wealthy benefactors, some of them political potentates she admitted into the Military Order of the Most Holy Savior of St. Bridget. The high patrons and general grand masters included men with bloody footprints in history:

- Juan Perón of Argentina, who welcomed Nazi fugitives;
- Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, who fled in exile to Paraguay where he was assassinated;
- Cuban strongman Fulgencio Batista, who was overthrown by Castro;
- The late Spanish dictator Gen. Francisco Franco;

- Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo, subject of Mario Vargas Llosa's scathing novel *The Feast of the Goat*.

The list has ironic bedfellows. Among them:

- Salvador Allende of Chile, a Marxist who died in a 1973 coup;
- U.S. President Ronald Reagan;
- Former Guatemalan President Efraín Ríos Montt, whose May 10 conviction for genocide was overturned on technicality.

Archbishops and cardinals joined the list of Hesselblad's donors in the pre-Vatican II symbiosis of a Catholic hierarchy and political tyrants who trampled human rights.

Mother Tekla courted new benefactors, notably José María Guardia, Mexico's reputed "Lord of the Casinos." In 2000, she named Guardia a commander of the order. "I'm helping the church to get a discounted sentence in purgatory," Guardia joked at the time to *Milenio*, the Mexico City daily.

Guardia, who made his early money in a dog-racing track in Juárez, "served as a bridge between the church and Fidel Castro," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported in 2003. The Mexican gambling mogul helped open the door for Mother Tekla with Castro.

She later named Castro a commander of the order.

Bestowing honors in societies of chivalry is a long tradition of the papacy for major church benefactors. In that sense, Mother Tekla was expanding the realm. But in 2003, religion writer Sandro Magister of *L'Espresso* tartly referred to her "copious offerings" to Msgr. Stanislaw Dziwisz, the Polish secretary and gatekeeper to John Paul.

The Legion of Christ, a now-discredited religious order, arranged a \$50,000 donation to Dziwisz from a Mexican benefactor who took his family to a private Mass with John Paul. Dziwisz has since become a cardinal and is archbishop of Krakow, Poland.

No city has as many huge, historic churches as Rome, nor such a visible presence of nuns wearing traditional habits, and priests in black clericals with white collars. Rome, like Washington, is a seat of bureaucracy with headquarters of religious orders from across the globe. Missionary orders that work in Africa, Latin America or Asia send priests or sisters to America every year, making their appeals at Masses on Sundays, relying on designated collections to help support their missions.

Italy does not tax convents and religious houses that rent rooms at bed-and-breakfast or hotel prices. This cottage industry helps many orders survive. There is even a French restaurant, L'Eau Vive, just off the Tiber, run by nuns. "I imagine people in America would be scandalized by nuns serving French food," a Western diplomat, on background, dryly noted, "but it goes toward their other work."

The Brigidines' orthodoxy shows in the traditional habits, veils and cycle of prayers similar to those in monasteries. According to reports from Adista, an Italian Catholic news agency, the order has attracted hundreds of young women from poor countries, particularly India, who see the convent as a path to better their lives.

That is how Tekla Famiglietti became a nun.

She recalled her childhood in a village near Naples, Italy. Her father and an older brother were serving in World War II. Her voice raced, describing how as a girl of 7 she scrambled to shelter a younger brother as bombs

exploded outside. Tears welled, her voice choking. "People died!" she said. "So much suffering -- people losing arms, a foot ... I saw missiles, too much for a girl to see. I thought, 'I must do something.' "

After the war, her father returned from Germany, and the brother from North Africa ? minus one leg. "I decided to spend my life for Jesus," she said. Her father opposed the idea; after long arguments and with the help of her godfather, she won her father's permission and entered St. Bridget's in Rome at 15, following several girls from her village.

Her family moved to America, settling in Long Island, N.Y.

"I was attracted by prayer and adorations in reparation for the evils committed in the world," she said. "I am a nun who strongly believes and is happy in my vocation."

Her tenure as abbess general took a jolt in 2002 when six young nuns from India fled their Briggittine houses in Italy and found sanctuary with a Benedictine abbot at St. John the Evangelist in Parma. (The priest gave an interview on condition that his name not be used.)

In 2004, Adista ran a lengthy series on the events. The reports laid the blame on Mother Tekla for an order run "as if it were a chain of hotels, subjecting the non-[European Union] nuns to grueling work without pay, such as washing, sweeping, cooking and making the bed in monasteries -- the work schedule was so intense that the religious were not even left with time to pray."

At the Benedictine abbot's request, Bishop Silvio Cesare Bonicelli of Parma issued a special decree, letting the fugitive sisters enter a monastery of Benedictine nuns. Mother Tekla pulled out the stops, trying without success to halt the bishop's order, then refusing to release the women's passports, and reporting them to police for deportation.

Under Mother Tekla's prodding, the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life ordered an apostolic visitation (read: investigation) of both the monastery where the abbot had given shelter to the sisters and the convent where they ended up.

The Vatican pressured the Benedictines to force the abbot to resign, Adista reported. The six sisters went before an Italian magistrate for not having papers. The court ordered that they receive the passports and awarded them national health cards.

In an interview with Adista, after being sacked as abbot, the priest said, "The integration of foreigners is not yet supported in today's church through respect of human values. We've got to fight for a new mindset that ... the Italian, Romanian, Polish or Filipino all have the same dignity. One can't look at other people as if they were barbarians to educate."

Eight years later, in November 2012, on an overcast, windblown Sunday morning, the priest stood outside a church in Rome where he had come for Mass with choir members from his parish in another city.

"I had a vow of obedience," he said somberly. He spoke about canon laws that govern the elections and internal workings of religious orders, shaking his head in recalling how Vatican officials had run over those rules.

"It was painful to lose my position, but I did the right thing."

Mother Tekla refused to discuss the events, saying, "I didn't read the newspapers."

When asked if other sisters had fled the order, she said, "No, thank God."

"It is all behind us now," one of the sisters who fled, now a Benedictine, said by telephone, on condition that her name not be used. "We are doing fine."

[Jason Berry, author of *Render Unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church*, writes from New Orleans. This is one in a series of articles published by *NCR* and *GlobalPost.com* with funding from a Knight Grant for Reporting on Religion and American Public Life at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism; the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting; and the Fund for Investigative Journalism.]

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