NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The Vatican's 'gay lobby,' round two

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 12, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis

Reports that Pope Francis allegedly referred to a "gay lobby" in the Vatican during a private session with Latin American religious have revived interest in a storyline that first erupted in February [1], following the surprise resignation announcement by Pope Benedict XVI and at the peak of the furor over the Vatican leaks affair.

Back then, Italian news outlets created a sensation by claiming that a commission of three cardinals empaneled by Benedict to investigate the leaks scandal identified a "gay lobby" potentially involved in airing the Vatican's dirty laundry. The reports also hinted that this lobby may have been behind Benedict's decision to step down.

Although the Vatican insisted the pope quit for his stated reasons, meaning age and exhaustion, the Italian contretemps nevertheless turbo-charged frustration about how the Vatican was being run and probably contributed to the election of a complete outsider to the papacy with a track record of good governance in just five ballots.

It should be stressed that the reports in the air today are based on leaked notes from the meeting with Francis, and the Vatican has refused to confirm or deny their content, so we don't actually know what the pope said. Nonetheless, because the "gay lobby" business is back in the headlines, I'll repeat here what I said in February.

Bottom line: It's no secret there are gays in the Vatican, and it's reasonable to think officials would be concerned that insiders with a secret to keep might be vulnerable to various kinds of pressure. The issue, in other words, isn't so much their sexuality, but rather the potential for manipulation anytime someone serving the pope is leading a double life. That said, there's also no evidence this was the "real" reason Benedict quit just as there's no reason to believe now that Francis is on the cusp of launching an anti-gay witch hunt.

The following material comes from a blog I posted [1] Feb. 22 about the "gay lobby" rumors.

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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 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 around the world, 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.

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 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 apparent 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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