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A recipe for overinterpreting the pope

by John L. Allen Jr.

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Pope Francis

Here's a recipe for overinterpretation: Start with intense public fascination with a new pope and add a basic lack of substantive movement on matters of policy and personnel. Sprinkle in the coincidence of the new regime reaching its 100-day mark and mix with a slow news cycle.

Two stories in the Italian press over the weekend nicely illustrate the resulting soufflé of hype.

On Saturday evening, Francis decided at the last minute to skip a Vatican musical concert, leaving the papal throne empty. Pictures of the "empty chair" were swiftly splashed across Italy's major news outlets, with pundits such as famed church historian Alberto Melloni styling it a metaphor for a rejection of imperial pomp. Some even termed it a deliberate "snub" of the Roman Curia.

One leading Italian daily had Francis declaring "I am not a Renaissance prince," though without quite claiming he actually used those words.

Also on Saturday, Italy's paper of record, *Corriere della Sera*, carried an unsourced piece asserting the new pope has abolished the "Gentlemen of the Pope," a body of Italian laymen traditionally given the honor of dressing up in elaborate tuxedos and welcoming visiting dignitaries to Vatican events.

Once again, the underlying suggestion was that Francis is dismantling the traditional trappings of a royal court. By Sunday, the paper was already running interviews asking people to react to the decision, without actually confirming it happened.

In both cases, there may be less "there" there than some breathless commentary has suggested.

Let's start with the "empty chair" story.

Well before Francis was elected, the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization had scheduled a classical concert for the evening of June 22 as part of the Year of Faith, intended to express how art and music can be instruments of evangelization.

Though no one quite said so out loud, the event seemed conceived with the famously music-loving Benedict XVI in mind. The piece was Beethoven's Ninth, and all the vocalists chosen to perform from Italy's Academy of Santa Cecilia were German.

Back in March, Francis confirmed all the events planned for the Year of Faith, so the concert went ahead. (As a footnote, it was originally conceived as an open-air popular event, but in the end it was moved indoors to the Paul VI Audience Hall.)

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On Saturday, however, Francis decided not to show up, leaving Archbishop Rino Fisichella of the Council for the New Evangelization to explain to a startled crowd that the pope had urgent business and couldn't make it.

The immediate thought was that perhaps the 76-year-old Francis was ill, but Fisichella confirmed that the pope would deliver his Sunday Angelus address the next day as usual. (He did so, and seemed perfectly fine.) Having ruled out a health scare, commentators then elevated the no-show into a philosophical statement.

On background, however, officials say the explanation was probably more prosaic.

Papal ambassadors, or nuncios, from around the world were in Rome last week for a conference, including a session with Francis on Friday. Since he does not come out of the world of Vatican diplomacy, Francis apparently felt his time Saturday evening would be better spent getting to know these guys, given that many of them were returning to their posts Sunday afternoon or today. That familiarity is especially important given that some of them may be in line for other Vatican positions that Francis shortly will have to fill, including the all-important role of Secretary of State.

In other words, his withdrawal from the concert may actually illustrate his work ethic more than a rejection of Renaissance ostentation.

(As a footnote, the empty chair sensation also illustrates how Benedict XVI can't catch a break. Back in 2005, he withdrew from a planned Vatican Christmas concert, which led to a spate of angry interviews with musicians and singers as well as speculation that Benedict didn't care for the pop culture feel of the event. In other words, his no-show was seen as a haughty gesture of disdain; with Francis, the same act has been praised as an evangelical statement of simplicity.)

As for the alleged abolition of the "Gentlemen of the Pope," *Corriere della Sera* reported on Saturday that Francis had called the custom "anachronistic" and even "dangerous," linking it to the fact that some of the gentlemen drawn from Italy's political and business classes have recently been involved in well-documented scandals.

By Sunday, the paper was interviewing members of the traditional papal nobility for reactions to the

move, without apparently having sought any official confirmation that the gentlemen had actually been suppressed.

Contacted by *NCR* for comment, the Vatican's spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, denied that any such decision has been made.

"What was written in *Corriere* certainly goes well beyond any decisions that have actually been taken, formalized and communicated," he said.

"The article is evidently based on personal conversations that someone claims to have had with the pope," Lombardi said, but added that nothing has been set in stone.

"We'll have to see whether the question of the gentlemen is looked at as part of a broader 'reform' of the Curia," he said.

To date, Francis has not named any new Gentlemen of the Pope, but so far, the group is still at least theoretically a going concern.

Both the empty chair and the abolition stories were touted as illustrating something profound about the new pope. Given the way they may have been stretched beyond their natural limits, however, they may actually have more to say about a media industry hungry for papal drama.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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