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Ferment in Nigeria; Syria; the Vatican bank; and sex scandals

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 28, 2013 All Things Catholic

Perhaps it's the curmudgeon in me, but I'm always drawn to news stories that seem to upend conventional wisdom, and I award bonus points if the story challenges both liberal and conservative biases at the same time.

That quirk probably explains why I find recent developments in Nigeria's Ahiara diocese so fascinating.

In December, Pope Benedict appointed a new bishop for the diocese, located in the oil-rich south of Nigeria not far from Port Harcourt. He tapped an outsider, 50-year-old Peter Ebere Okpaleke from the Awka diocese, triggering strong protests from the Mbaise ethnic group that populates Ahiara. They wanted one of their own.

The Mbaise, who are legendarily ferocious about their Catholicism, are sometimes called the Irish of Nigeria because of their penchant for generating priests and dispatching them as missionaries. Yet they've long complained that their fidelity goes unappreciated, charging that the country's hierarchy is dominated by rival ethnic groups from a neighboring state that forms the ecclesiastical province of Onitsha, which includes Okpaleke's home diocese.

Many Mbaise say they've been subjected to a form of "ecclesiastical colonization," in this case not by Europeans but by other Nigerians.

The appointment of Okpaleke is in keeping with the general practice of papal emissaries in Africa, who often try to upend tribal prejudices by deliberately naming bishops to dioceses who don't belong to the majority ethnic group. Yet in places such as Ahiara, that practice can be a tough sell.

When the appointment was announced, some 400 priests and laity led a protest march while Mbaise youth locked the doors of the cathedral to prevent the new bishop from entering. A statement from the Ahiara Diocesan Priests Association said the local clergy "categorically reject" the imposition of a non-Mbaise bishop.

"To us, who are being maligned and embarrassed by Msgr. Okpalaeke's appointment, it is an enormous injustice and cannot be allowed to stand," the statement said.

Blowback was so strong that Okpaleke actually had to be consecrated outside the diocese at the Seat of Wisdom seminary in Ulakwo. A group of local elders has appealed for calm while Bishop Hilary Okeke of the Nnewi diocese, also part of the Onitsha province, has angrily asserted that "the spirit of the church is being sacrificed on the altar of sectionalism, ethnicity and socio-political considerations."

Although this sort of tension in Africa is nothing new, here's how the story tweaks the biases of both left and right.

Western Catholic liberals often complain about an "imperial papacy" they believe took shape in the 19th and 20th centuries, pointing to the centralization of episcopal appointments in Rome as Exhibit A. Many clamor for a greater role for the local church in picking their own bishops, if not outright popular election.

Generally, that position is based on the assumption that the Vatican is a conservative force while those at the grass roots are more inclined to reform.

Yet as the Ahiara example illustrates, in some parts of the developing world, papal control of the process acts as a force for what most Western liberals would recognize as a far more "enlightened" and "progressive" stance on race relations than what one would likely get from a plebiscite.

Opposition to prejudice is a signature liberal cause, and the hard truth is that an imperial papacy is sometimes the best way to challenge its tug.

Conservatives, meanwhile, often assume that the rise of Africa as a Catholic powerhouse will bolster their positions in church debates, since the ethos in most African societies is generally traditional. There's no ferment over women priests or gay marriage in most parts of Catholic Africa, and orthodox belief is taken for granted.

Yet if by "conservative" one also means deferential to authority, the example of Nigeria clearly shows that's not always the case. In terms of resistance to ecclesiastical diktat, Western reform groups have nothing on the priests and laity of Ahiara, who have literally taken to the streets to rage against the machine.

In this case, many Mbaise Catholics suspect the hidden influence of Cardinal Francis Arinze, now 80, who hails from Onitsha, accusing him of using his Vatican connections to set up clergy from his own clan as the ruling class. That may be terribly unfair, though it's a natural enough suspicion in a country where corruption and abuse of power are all too familiar.

In any event, the point is that many African Catholics are anything but obeisant to the chain of command regarding matters outside the realm of faith and morals.

What Ahiara actually underscores is that African Catholicism, for better or worse -- and sometimes both -- can't be fit neatly into Western categories. All by itself, that's a lesson worth absorbing.

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Makers of American foreign policy aren't exactly famous for giving robust consideration to the views of people on the ground when they craft strategy, but even so, it's worth pondering what Syria's Christians are saying about our new willingness to arm the country's motley assortment of rebel forces.

While Christians are not the only ones suffering in Syria today, their losses continue to be acute.

As the Catholic Near East Welfare Association has pointed out, Catholics tend to be especially exposed because of their geography. While Syriac Christians are concentrated in a northern zone that's largely autonomous and stable and the Orthodox are found predominantly in and around Damascus, where President Bashar Assad's forces maintain basic control, the Catholics live in the middle zone, including cities such as Aleppo and Homs, where the fighting has been most intense.

The latest blow came Sunday, when a 46-year-old Catholic priest named Fr. Francois Murad was killed when rebels from the militant Islamic Jabhat al-Nusra movement attacked a Franciscan convent in a village near the Turkish border.

Franciscan Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the head of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, told Vatican Radio on Monday that Murad was not a Franciscan but had taken refuge at the convent because of threats to his safety in the traditionally Christian village of Ghassanieh, which has been repeatedly attacked and is now a ghost town.

The fact that elements within the rebels have made special targets out of Christians brought a pointed warning about putting weapons in their hands from Fr. Halim Noujaim, the Franciscans' regional minister for Syria and Lebanon.

"I would like everyone to know that the West, in supporting the revolutionaries, is supporting religious extremists and helping to kill Christians," Noujaim said in angry comments after the attack on Murad.

"In light of this step," he said, "not a single Christian will remain in the area."

As is well known, the Obama administration recently announced that the U.S. will provide small arms and ammunition to the rebels, apparently in the hope that by denying Assad an outright military victory, pressure will be increased for a negotiated solution. Critics charge that the cure may be worse than the disease, paving the way either for Iraq-style chaos or the Egyptian-style rise of an Islamist regime, and in either case setting up Syria's Christian minority for special hardship.

In that debate, one hopes space will be found for the voices of people such as Noujaim. After all, they're the ones who will have to live with the consequences of whatever we do -- or fail to do.

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Everyone knows that the cardinals who propelled a Latin American outsider to the papacy in just five ballots in March were acutely frustrated with what they saw as breakdowns in Vatican management. To date, Francis hasn't done much to break with business as usual, but signals continue to accumulate that when he gets started, we may be in for an earthquake rather than a mere tremor.

The Vatican announced Wednesday that Francis has created a new commission to investigate the Vatican bank, technically known as the Institute for the Works of Religion (IOR). Here is my piece on the commission [1].

Early reaction among seasoned Vatican-watchers is that this is a big deal. Writing in *Corriere della Sera* on Thursday, Massimo Franco said that it augurs "a radical project of renewal" in the Vatican. Noting that two of the five members appointed to the commission are Americans, Msgr. Peter Wells of the Secretariat of State and former Ambassador to the Holy See Mary Ann Glendon, Franco also said the pope's move reflects a healthy dose of "Anglo-Saxon pragmatism."

An accompanying piece in *Corriere* quoted Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras, the coordinator of the pope's new kitchen cabinet formed of eight cardinals from around the world. In the article, Maradiaga expressed a degree of skepticism about the bank's current modus operandi: "They've said that the IOR is not a bank but a foundation," Maradiaga said. "Then why in the world has it acted like a bank?"

The ferment over the bank is unfolding against the backdrop of yet another scandal. Msgr. Nunzio Scarano, an official of the Vatican financial office the Apostolic Patrimony of the Holy See, was recently arrested [2] after prosecutors in Salerno opened an investigation because he apparently withdrew $730,000 in cash from a Vatican bank account and then used it to pay off personal debts, allegedly convincing more than 50 friends to convert 10,000 Euro each into cashier's checks in order to evade reporting requirements.

In Thursday's *La Repubblica*, Vatican writer Paolo Rodari said the creation of the commission presages "a

revolution not just in structures but in personnel," a point seemingly confirmed by an accompanying interview with Cardinal George Pell of Australia, another member of the pope's "Gang of Eight."

Asked what the core of Vatican reform would be, Pell said that key point is making sure "capable and competent" people are appointed to the various departments.

There's general agreement that with this commission, Francis has clearly signaled two things. First, he intends to take a personal interest in the Vatican bank, tracking its operations at the level of detail. Second, and equally clearly, he wants independent confirmation of assurances from the bank's leadership that everything is on the up-and-up.

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If finances are one recurrent source of heartache for the Vatican, the church's sexual abuse scandals are obviously another. In his capacity as the bishop of Rome, as opposed to the governor of the Vatican, Francis now faces a fresh mess on that front, too.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the Italian media was full of sensational charges that at least nine priests in Rome (not Vatican officials, but local pastors) allegedly employ a prostitution ring set up to provide teenage boys to clergy, paying roughly $130 to $200 for each encounter. According to the reports, its facilitator is supposedly an ex-cop who prowls the area around Termini, Rome's main bus and train station, looking for recruits.

The charges come from Patrizio Poggi, a former pastor of St. Philip Neri church in Rome who was criminally convicted in 1999 for sexual abuse of minors and sentenced to eight years in the city's Rebibbia prison. Poggi made the claims in an interview with Italian police in early March, apparently reportedly saying he felt compelled to do so as a matter of conscience.

For the record, Poggi also claimed that the same people who run the alleged prostitution ring are involved in the theft of consecrated eucharistic hosts for sale to Satanic sects.

The Italian authorities, apparently, are not quite convinced. In comments to the media, prosecutors have said that at least for now, they're not opening any investigations of Roman priests on the basis of Poggi's testimony.

On Wednesday, Cardinal Agostino Vallini, the vicar of Rome, issued a blistering statement complaining of "calumnious disinformation."

Among other things, Vallini condemned the media for "making itself a megaphone" for Poggi's claims, which he said are not backed by any "objective evidence." This sort of coverage, Vallini said, "violates the most elementary norms of journalistic deontology" as well as "respect for privacy." He called the reports "a mode of discrediting the church and its ministers."

Vallini noted that he visited Poggi while he was in jail, saying that neither then nor at any subsequent moment did Poggi ever say he had information about misconduct by other priests. Vallini suggested Poggi is making false accusations either for "revenge" or out of "personal resentment."

Poggi's credibility aside, the affair is a reminder that the fallout from the sexual abuse crisis remains a critical piece of unfinished business, something Francis will likely have to address as part of his broader reform campaign.

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Some time back, I ticked off a fair number of bloggers by asserting that Catholic cyberspace tends to be overly

given to vitriol and spleen-venting. Moreover, anyone who's ever come up to me to comment on my "blog" knows that my usual response is that it's not a blog, and I'm not a blogger. I typically insist it's a column and I'm a journalist.

In that light, it may be a bit disingenuous to note that the Catholic Press Association recently gave "All Things Catholic" its first place award in the category of "online blog," citing it for "careful consideration, going deep, [and] raising level of conversation on topics of interest to Catholics and all thoughtful people."

I'm grateful for the recognition, whatever someone chooses to call my weekly offerings. And to all the terrific Catholic bloggers out there, I'm honored to be considered in your company.

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