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

Scandal and reform in Rome; the 'Francis effect'; papal simplicity; and more

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 5, 2013 All Things Catholic

***Note**: This column was written before today's release [1] of* Lumen fidei *("The Light of Faith"), the first encyclical from Pope Francis, as well as the announcement that Popes John XXIII and John Paul II will be canonized together [2]. Watch* NCR *Today for analysis. Also watch for reaction to Francis' visit Monday to the southern Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, a major point of arrival for undocumented immigrants from Africa and the Middle East seeking to reach Europe.*

There's something oddly fitting about the fact that Wimbledon is going on at the same time that each day seems to bring a fresh development on the Vatican bank front because contrasting signs of scandal and reform are rocketing back and forth in Rome like tennis balls during a heated volley.

Consider what June and early July have brought:

- News broke June 14 that Msgr. Nunzio Scarano, an accountant for the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See, which handles the Vatican's property and investments, was under investigation by Italian authorities for alleged money-laundering. The probe reportedly focused on accounts he held at the Institute for the Works of Religion, better known as the Vatican bank. The Vatican quickly said Scarano had been suspended from his position earlier in the month.
- One day later, Pope Francis appointed Msgr. Battista Ricca as the new prelate, or personal delegate of the pope, for the Vatican bank. Ricca had been the director of the Casa Santa Marta, where Francis has chosen to reside, and the appointment was hailed as a sign that the pope had tapped someone of personal trust to keep an eye on things.
- On June 26, the Vatican announced that Francis had set up a five-member commission to investigate the Vatican bank, giving it full authority to interview personnel and collect information. The body includes two Americans: Msgr. Peter Wells of the Secretariat of State and former Ambassador to the Holy See Mary Ann Glendon.
- Two days later, June 28, Italian police arrested Scarano along with an Italian secret service agent and a financier, charging all three with plotting to smuggle almost $30 million into Italy on behalf of a family of Italian shipping magnates. Wiretaps and emails collected during the probe suggested that Scarano, known in Rome as "Monsignor 500" for the 500-euro bills he flashed around, had a cozy relationship with officials of the Vatican bank and used his accounts to conceal the origins of his money.
- On Monday, the Vatican announced that the top two day-to-day officials at the bank, director Paolo Cipriani and vice-director Massimo Tulli, had resigned, effective immediately, in order to "increase the pace" of the bank's "transformation." The statement also said that officials of the Washington, D.C.-based Promontory Group, global experts on anti-money-laundering efforts, will be brought in to advise the bank.
- During his homily at his daily Mass at the Casa Santa Marta the next morning, Francis said it's important to "flee from sin" without nostalgia or fear of change. Although he never referred to the bank scandals, many observers couldn't help reading his comments in that context.
- The same day, Italian investigators said a criminal probe against Cipriani and Tulli had flagged at least 13

suspect transactions between 2011 and 2012, for which the two men could theoretically face up to three years in jail. They also revealed wiretaps that showed Scarano advising friends who needed something from the Vatican bank to deal directly with Tulli, describing him as amenable.

- On Wednesday, respected journalist Sandro Magister dropped hints that Ricca, the pope's newly appointed prelate, could face pressure to resign because of skeletons in the closest from his time as a diplomat in Uruguay from 1999 to 2000. Magister said Francis was informed of the rumors during a late June meeting with Vatican envoys, writing that they fall into the category of "pink power" and "scandalous conduct."
- Also on Wednesday, the Vatican announced that its new financial watchdog agency, the Financial Intelligence Authority, has been admitted as a full member of the Egmont Group, a global network of 130 financial intelligence units. According to Swiss lawyer René Brülhart, director of the Vatican agency, the decision marks "a recognition of the Holy See's and the Vatican City State's systematic efforts in tracking and fighting money laundering and financing of terrorism."
- On Thursday, the Vatican released its consolidated financial statement for 2012, showing a profit of $2.85 million for the Holy See and almost $30 million for the Vatican City State, despite a 7.45 percent decline in contributions from both individual faithful and religious orders. As in past years, the Vatican bank provided a contribution of just over $70 million to fund papal activity. (The Holy See's annual budget is around $330 million.)

Honestly, it's enough to make your head spin. A Wimbledon final on center court has nothing on the baseline-to-baseline intensity of this match between signs of change and reminders of just how deep the hole goes.

Although the story is still a moving target, three early conclusions seem possible.

First, Francis appears to want a reform that goes beyond the merely cosmetic. Granted, setting up a blue-ribbon commission is sometimes a bureaucratic dodge to offer the impression of concern without its substance. However, the fall of Cipriani and Tulli is a clear break with business as usual, especially given how rare it is for anyone to lose a job in the Vatican. The decision to bring in outside experts and allow them to nose around in the bank's business is also striking.

The seal of approval from the Egmont Group indicates that secular authorities on transparency believe the Vatican is moving in the right direction, suggesting Francis doesn't have to start from scratch.

Second, the obstacles Francis faces are nonetheless formidable, a point clearly illustrated by the Scarano affair. (More on that below.)

Third, Francis' greatest ally in the press for reform may not be his Vatican aides or other ecclesiastical heavyweights but the Italian police and magistrates. If anyone challenges the pope about the necessity for change, all he has to do is hold up a newspaper about the latest investigations and arrests and ask: Do you want more of this?

Having set up the parallel between Wimbledon and the Vatican bank saga, it's important to note a key difference. In the former, you get a clear winner after two weeks. With regard to the Vatican, however, it's still anybody's guess how long the contest between glasnost and denial might take.

* * *

Whatever else one might say about Scarano, he certainly appears to have set a new high-water mark for sheer chutzpah.

According to investigators, his 007-style caper took shape between May and July 2012. For those whose

memories may have dimmed, that period coincided precisely with the apex of the notorious Vatican leaks affair, which featured a near-daily round of exposés charging, among other things, corruption and cronyism in Vatican finances.

To be specific, here's a tick-tock of what was going on during the same period Scarano was chatting casually with a reportedly corrupt secret service agent and a shady financier about jetting up to Switzerland and coming back with a bag full of money:

- May 17, 2012: The book *His Holiness: The Secret Letters of Benedict XVI* by Italian journalist Gianluigi Nuzzi was published, collecting the leaked documents and fleshing out the clandestine fashion in which Nuzzi got his hands on them. The book immediately shot to the top of the bestseller lists.
- May 23: Former papal butler Paolo Gabriele was arrested and charged with being Nuzzi's mole, triggering a global sensation and setting the stage for the Vatican's "trial of the century."
- May 24: Italian economist Ettore Gotti Tedeschi was fired as the president of the Vatican bank, setting off fevered speculation as to the motives for his ouster.
- June 5: Agents of the Italian financial police raided Gotti Tedeschi's home in Piacenza and his office in Milan as part of a separate corruption probe. Among the items they uncovered was a dossier from Gotti Tedeschi's years at the bank in which he allegedly identified a variety of internal enemies and voiced concerns about shady dealings.
- June 28: In an attempt to refute impressions of intrigue, the Vatican bank opened its doors to a group of journalists. Cipriani claimed that "we want to lift the 'veil of secrecy' ... and to show that our effort for transparency is real."
- July 18: The Council of Europe's anti-money-laundering agency, Moneyval, issued its first evaluation of the Vatican. Moneyval found the Vatican had come a long way in a short time toward transparency but also raised concerns about the role of a new financial watchdog unit and about the need for external regulation of the bank.

Even if you can somehow get past the moral and legal qualms, in light of this context, it simply defies imagination that Scarano didn't say to his confederates: "Listen, guys, now just isn't the time."

The brazen timing illustrates the deep challenge to reform. The question Francis faces is this: How do you change an institutional culture in which a Vatican official -- one with important financial responsibilities, no less -- could look at such a sea of scandal and still think to himself, "Why not?"

Maybe allowing a couple of heads to roll, as Francis did this week with the top officials of the Vatican bank, is one way to start.

* * *

A final dispatch from the scandal front: Last week, I noted the ferment in the Italian press over lurid accusations by an ex-priest and convicted sex abuser, Patrizio Poggi, about a supposed prostitution ring allegedly run by a former cop that provided pastors in Rome with teenage boys. Poggi also charged that the ring was involved in the theft of consecrated eucharistic hosts for sale to Satanic sects.

Those accusations were ferociously denied by Cardinal Agostino Vallini, the vicar of Rome.

The latest development came Monday, when Italian police arrested Poggi for slander. They concluded he made the whole thing up, with prosecutors quoted as saying that "he wanted to cause a scandal that be believed could have led to a review of his sentence and his re-admission to the church."

At a moment in which there seem to be fresh reports of scandal almost every day, it's a reminder of a sometimes

overlooked point: Just because there's smoke doesn't automatically mean there's fire.

* * *

Several polls in the States have already confirmed strong approval ratings for the new pope on this side of the ocean. A fresh survey in Italy shows the "Francis effect" is still in full flower there, too.

Italy's national public opinion institute Demopolis, which is government-sponsored rather than a church outfit, released the results of a poll conducted in late June showing that 85 percent of Italians have confidence in the new pope against 9 percent who don't and 6 percent who say they don't know.

The "trust the pope" camp includes a staggering 96 percent of practicing Catholics, which means the positive verdict among the church's rank and file is basically unanimous. Survey director Pietro Vento says that's the highest mark for a pope since the peak years of John Paul II's papacy.

Strikingly, Francis' popularity seems to be having spill-over effects for the church. Sixty-three percent of Italians today say they trust the church opposed to 46 percent back in January amid the Vatican leaks affair.

The survey asked Italians what they like about Francis. The top answers:

- Spontaneity and language: 75 percent
- Simplicity: 71 percent
- Closeness to the people: 68 percent
- Attention to the weakest: 63 percent
- Sobriety: 52 percent

According to Vento, nothing else broke the 40 percent threshold. It's interesting that none of these responses really have much to do with the policy dimension of the papacy -- Francis' creation of a commission of cardinals to bring the voice of local churches into governance, for instance, or rumblings of a reform of the Vatican bank. It's another confirmation that when it comes to impressions of a pope, especially early ones, style often trumps substance.

The survey also found that the single most popular thing Francis has said to date among Italians is his now-famous line, "How I would like a poor church for the poor!"

Popularity is fleeting, and circumstances could easily recalibrate impressions. Nonetheless, Francis starts out with an enormous reservoir of popular support.

* * *

On the subject of popes and simplicity, it's worth noting that this past weekend brought an important milestone. June 30 was the 50th anniversary of the last papal coronation, the elaborate ceremony in which pontiffs were once invested with a three-level tiara, or crown, said to symbolize the church militant, triumphant and prayerful.

One can find footage of the event on YouTube, reaching an apex with the famous rite in which the master of ceremonies fell to his knees before the pope with a smoldering cloth, and as it's being consumed, reminded him, "Sic transit gloria mundi" -- "So go the glories of this world."

The last edition took place on June 30, 1963, when Pope Paul VI received a special tiara presented as a gift by his Milan archdiocese. Six months later, he laid it on the altar of St. Peter's Basilica, as a symbol of renouncing the pope's temporal authority. It ended up in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., after Cardinal Francis Spellman assured Paul VI that proceeds from its display would go

to the poor.

That, as they say, was that: None of the four popes since has revived the tiara, and it seems unlikely we'll ever see a papal coronation again.

The anniversary offers a reminder that Francis may be getting high marks for renouncing some of the pomp of the papacy, but it's hardly a project that began with him. It's been underway for the last 50 years, making Francis more akin to a culmination than a point of departure.

* * *

While we're noting milestones, Monday marked the formal entrance of Croatia into the European Union, bringing membership to 28 states. Croatia's candidacy was backed both by Catholic authorities in the country and in the Vatican, despite the persistence of a strong current of anti-EU sentiment in conservative Catholic circles.

The Vatican is generally both pro-UN and pro-EU, seeing them from the point of view of a small state needing the democratic rules of international organizations to level the diplomatic playing field. It also has a specific reason for wanting Croatia to have a place at the European table. In a continent marked by growing secularism, the calculus is that strongly Catholic Croatia can inject a dose of determination in protecting both Europe's Christian roots and the public role of religious institutions.

One can see the logic. For instance, when the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2009 that Italy had to take the crucifixes off the walls of its public school classrooms, Croatia was one of handful of Catholic states, such as Malta and Lithuania, that joined a largely Orthodox cluster of nations that supported Italy in its appeal. They prevailed, and the ruling was overturned.

As an EU member, Croatia will have more opportunities to play that kind of role. Yet there are also signs that the church in Croatia may be losing clout domestically, seeding doubt about how much the Vatican ought to count on the country's support going forward.

In 2011, a regional survey found that Croatia ranked in the top tier of Central and European states where the public feels the church has too much influence on national life. In 2012, Croatia liberalized artificial reproduction, and last September, it adopted a new sex education curriculum -- in both cases, over vehement Catholic opposition.

An auxiliary bishop in Zagreb publicly suggested overthrowing what he called the country's "communist" rulers during the sex-ed debate, yet a January poll found that only 22 percent of Croatians disapprove of the curriculum and 56 say they don't want the church "meddling" in education.

Given that background, Cardinal Josip Bozani? of Zagreb and his fellow Croatian bishops will be pressed to shore up their standing at home at the same moment the Vatican expects them to exert greater influence on the European stage.

All this suggests interesting times ahead for the nation famously dubbed by Pope Leo X in 1519, when Croats stared down an Ottoman invasion, as the "antemurale Christianitatis" -- the "bulwark of Christianity."

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org [3]. Follow him on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr [4].]

Source URL (retrieved on *08/21/2014 - 03:40*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/scandal-and-reform-rome-francis-effect-papal-simplicity-and-more

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/55356
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/55361
[3] mailto:jallen@ncronline.org
[4] http://twitter.com/JohnLAllenJr