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Pot still boils in Rome while Francis is away

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 26, 2013 All Things Catholic
Rio de Janeiro

I'm in Rio de Janeiro this week, watching Francis wow Brazil. The trip has brought a little bit of everything: crowds so pumped up for the pope they created security nightmares, protestors pushed back with tear gas (they were mad at the government, not so much the pope), Francis at his pastoral best at the Marian shrine of Aparecida, and a powerful message of solidarity with the poor in a Rio slum.

You can find my daily reports from Rio on the *NCR* website [1].

All that would be enough to make the outing memorable, and the big finish hasn't even happened. Francis will participate in the traditional Via Crucis procession for World Youth Day on Friday night, attend an evening vigil Saturday, and celebrate an open-air Mass for what's expected to be as many as 2 million people Sunday.

The mere fact Francis is out of town, however, doesn't mean his problems in Rome have taken a vacation.

In fact, while Francis is making his triumphant homecoming to Latin America, there are three fires burning back in Rome, one of which he learned of just before he left and two more that have erupted while he's been away.

Taken together, these three situations illustrate that Francis will have his work cut out for him when he gets back. If nothing else, his decision not to head out for the traditional summer retreat at Castel Gandolfo during August and to stay on the job instead is starting to look like a good call.

Msgr. Battista Ricca

I wrote last week [2] about the explosive piece published by veteran Italian journalist Sandro Magister concerning the pope's hand-picked choice to serve as his prelate, or papal delegate, for the Vatican bank, an Italian clergyman named Msgr. Battista Ricca.

Magister's story appeared July 19, three days before Francis left for Brazil.

In a nutshell, Magister charged that when Ricca was a Vatican diplomat in Uruguay from roughly 1999 to 2001, he had a live-in male lover; that he cruised gay bars, and once was beaten up; and that another time, he brought a young man back to the Vatican embassy in Montevideo and ended up trapped in an elevator with him overnight.

For Magister, the fact that Ricca was able to return to Rome, take over as director of several residences, and eventually win the trust of the new pope -- without his history in Uruguay surfacing until now -- is proof positive that there's a "gay lobby" in the Vatican that takes care of its own.

There's nothing new to report, except that people who have seen the pope since the Magister piece appeared report he still has confidence in Ricca and that for now, at least, Ricca's keeping his job.

It may be that Francis knows more about Ricca's personal story and has reasons at that level for resisting a rush to judgment. Without any direct insight into the mind of the pope, I can think of one other motive he might have for shrinking from sending Ricca packing, at least anytime soon.

Francis might be concerned that if did so, he'd create the precedent that anyone who wants to stop his reform can do so by digging up dirt on the people he tasks with carrying it out. For the leader of any institution, especially one that claims moral leadership, that's an awfully dangerous red flag to wave.

Francesca Immacolata Chaouqui

Also July 19, Francis announced the creation of a new pontifical commission to study reform in the economic and administrative structures of the Vatican, appointing eight people to run it -- all but one laity, with most drawn from the worlds of banking, finance and law.

The early reaction was to see the move as another positive step toward reform, but Tuesday -- allegedly a day of rest for Francis here in Brazil -- a controversy broke out in the Italian press over one of his appointments, a laywoman named Francesca Immacolata Chaouqui, the lone Italian in the group.

A 30-year-old devoted Catholic who's worked, among other places, at Ernst and Young, Chaouqui is the child of an Italian mother and an Egyptian father. She could also be a candidate for another distinction: The first papal nominee in history to lose a job because of use of social media.

Chaouqui, as it turns out, has a very active Twitter account [3]. Enterprising journalists followed her digital paper trail, and here's what they found:

- Back in February, she tweeted that Benedict XVI had leukemia, although the Vatican has repeatedly denied that any specific health concern led to his decision to resign the papacy.
- Chaouqui has sent out several seemingly friendly tweets about journalist Gianluigi Nuzzi, who was the one who received stolen documents from the pope's butler and gave rise to the Vatican leaks affair. At one stage, Chaouqui told Nuzzi he was "bleeding right."
- At another point, Chaouqui tweeted: "Syrian children are dying, and the church is fighting against the butler. How can a Catholic stay Christian like this?"
- Chaouqui also doesn't seem well-disposed to the Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. On Feb. 11, the day Benedict announced his resignation, she tweeted: "Bertone has won ... as a believer, I'm depressed."

Among other things, that last tweet suggests Chaouqui may have something to learn about the Vatican. If anything was clear about Benedict's resignation, it was that it also meant the imminent end of Bertone's run.

To round out the presentation, Chaouqui also sent a tweet the evening of March 13, when Francis was elected, saying "they tell me he's French." (Presumably, she got confused between "Francesco" and *francese*, the Italian word for "French.")

Granted, none of these tweets are really scandalous. If anything, they illustrate a bit of poor judgment and the lack of a good internal editor before hitting the "send" button. Nonetheless, they've caused some commentators to wonder if Chaouqui really belongs on a commission charged with drafting the blueprint of Francis' reform.

To the question of whether Francis will be inclined to dump her, at least any time soon, my answer is "probably not." As for why not, see the last point made above about Ricca.

Msgr. Nunzio Scarano

Finally, Msgr. Nunzio Scarano was back in the news Thursday. For those who don't recall, he's the former Vatican accountant who was recently arrested for involvement in a plot to smuggle $26 million in cash into Italy on a private plane. He also faces an investigation for allegedly using his Vatican bank accounts to launder funds.

Italian media outlets Thursday featured a leaked letter Scarano reportedly wrote to Pope Francis on July 20 protesting his innocence. If so, it had to be penned from Rome's Queen of Heaven (Regina Coeli) prison, where Scarano is currently behind bars.

According to the text presented in media reports, Scarano insisted he never acted for his own benefit, rather only "to help those who asked for my help."

In itself, the fact that someone facing criminal charges has reportedly claimed innocence probably isn't any shocker. Slightly juicer is what else Scarano allegedly told the pope about his situation at the Administration of the Patrimony of the Holy See, the Vatican's main financial department, known by its Italian acronym APSA.

According to the reports, Scarano told Francis he was the only priest in APSA and "I wasn't allowed to do very much." He says he waged a constant battle against "the abuses of my lay superiors," abuses he says were "cover up by some cardinals ... with skeletons in the closest, who were well blackmailed."

He does not name who he believes these "blackmailed cardinals" were.

Scarano claims in the letter to have sought help in bringing these abuses to light from Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz of Cracow, the former secretary of John Paul II, and Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan.

"My banking operations at the Vatican bank were always done under the counsel and direction of the superiors, and I never abused the courtesy," Scarano reportedly wrote the pope.

He is supposed to have added: "Your Holiness, I've always served the church, with a true and priestly spirit. I hope to be able to send you secretly my envelope of documents so they might strongly reinforce your great and courageous effort to finally bring order to the sad administrative, economic and financial realities of the Holy See, and all the abuses annexed and connected to them."

There are at least two layers of doubt about all this that have to be attached.

First, the letter has been reported as genuine, but so far, no one's officially confirmed it. Second, even if it is, one has to take the protestations of an accused criminal with a grain of salt, even if the principle of innocent until proven guilty still applies.

That said, the situation is a reminder of how much work Francis still has to do on the financial front, beginning with the Vatican bank -- both to foster transparency and, perhaps just as importantly, the perception of transparency.

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