

An American makes the pope's lineup; Christians in Syria and Egypt

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 16, 2013 All Things Catholic

Changes in administrations always trigger a game of musical chairs, and it's well underway in the Vatican right now. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Benedict XVI's Secretary of State, is on his way out, while Archbishop Georg Gänswein, though still running the papal household, is no longer the pope's go-to guy.

One figure navigating the transition to Francis quite nicely, however, is a key American insider under Benedict too: Msgr. Peter Wells, who holds the critical job of assessor in the Secretariat of State.

Every new pope has to assemble his own team, and Wells already has been penciled in to Francis' starting lineup ? as a matter of fact, right in the heart of the batting order.

To be clear, Wells is not the only American with juice, and not the highest-ranking cleric. That's Boston's Sean O'Malley, by far the U.S. cardinal who knows Latin America best, and the only one to have stayed with Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Argentina before he became pope.

There's also an expectation that an American prelate soon will be named to head a Vatican department, filling the void left after Cardinal William Levada stepped down at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith last July. (One tip has Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., going to the Congregation for Clergy, but word to the wise: In the Francis era, personnel rumors have the approximate value of buggy whip stock.)

Yet whatever happens, no American is likely to be as critical to day-to-day Vatican operations as Wells.

Born and raised in Tulsa, Okla., Wells got his initial Roman seasoning as a seminarian at the North American College, earning degrees from the Jesuit-run Gregorian University and the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family at the Lateran University. He later got a doctorate in canon law from the Gregorian, while also studying at the Academia, the Vatican's elite school for diplomats.

After a brief stint in the Vatican embassy in Nigeria, Wells returned to Rome in 2002 to work in the first section of the Secretariat of State, the department that deals with general church affairs ? meaning, pretty much, whatever's bubbling at the moment.

Wells was tapped to head the English desk in 2006 and then named assessor in 2009, making him the top deputy to the *sostituto*, or Vatican chief of staff. For "West Wing" fans, that makes Wells the Josh Lyman character.

This alone would qualify Wells as a major player, but his résumé only scratches the surface. In effect, he's become the interpreter and point of contact between the Vatican and the entire English-speaking world. He's the first port of call for Anglophone churchmen, diplomats, activists, and other movers and shakers who need entrée, who have a project to promote or a bone to pick, or who'd simply like to know what's going on.

To take a banal example, when a Chicago lawyer wanted to donate the Internet domain name "popefrancis.com" to the new pontiff, he contacted Cardinal Francis George, who in turn called Wells. (As a footnote, the lawyer

bought the domain in 2010, well before there actually was a Pope Francis. His next prediction is that the Cubs will win the World Series in 2015; odds-makers can debate which of those two developments is more improbable.)

More substantively, secret cables revealed as part of the Wikileaks scandal show how much diplomats rely on Wells for readings of the Vatican's take on sensitive issues, such as the church's sexual abuse scandals. Other players know the score, too. In 2010, when parishioners in Boston wanted to appeal the closing of nine local parishes, they consulted a couple of canon lawyers about the best way to get the pope's attention, and the reply was to address the petition to Wells.

Over the years I've had more exchanges than I can count with American bishops who express interest or concern over something going on in Rome, and who wind up the conversation by saying, "I'll have to talk to Wells."

Wells generally shuns the spotlight, partly because of his job and partly because of personality. Behind the scenes, however, he's almost Zelig-like in his ubiquity.

For instance, when President Barack Obama met Benedict XVI in the Vatican in 2009, Wells served as the interpreter, and the video feed showed him catching up to the president in the hallway afterward to ensure that a particular point had been clearly understood.

It's been said that if Wells were 10 years older, he'd be a strong contender to be the first American Secretary of State, with pretty much everything you'd want ? smarts, a strong work ethic, a good sense of humor, and a reputation for playing things straight. Insiders also say that Wells has penetrated the Italian cultural scene without being assimilated to it, retaining a healthy Anglo-Saxon impatience with double-talk and inefficiency.

Whatever the reasons, Well is clearly poised to be a player under the new regime.

When Francis created a five-member commission on June 26 to investigate the troubled Vatican bank, formally known as the "Institute for the Works of Religion," Wells was tapped as part of the group. Three of the others are bishops or cardinals, while the remaining member is American laywoman Mary Ann Glendon ? meaning that in all probability, Wells will be the prime mover in terms of actually doing the work.

The commission reports directly to Francis, and has been given special authority to collect documents and testimony without being hamstrung by internal Vatican rules that protect confidentiality.

Last week, Francis issued another legal document intended to beef up the Vatican's commitment to fighting money-laundering and other financial shenanigans, creating a new "Financial Security Committee" to oversee the transparency efforts of all agencies of both the Holy See and the Vatican City State.

The committee is composed of seven officials, with Wells in charge. (Technically the document says it's the assessor who heads the committee, whoever that may be, but obviously Francis knows it's Wells right now.)

By dint of circumstance, including the recent arrest of a Vatican accountant on charges of trying to smuggle \$26 million into Italy and civil investigations of the recently resigned leadership of the Vatican bank, financial transparency has become the acid test of whatever reform Francis is going to deliver. The fact that Francis has effectively set up Wells to be the architect of his financial glasnost thus speaks volumes.

This American heavy-hitter, in other words, doesn't look like he's headed for the bench anytime soon.

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For all those concerned about the fate of Italian Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, the anti-Assad activist and pioneer

in Christian/Muslim relations who went missing in Syria on July 29, this has been a truly agonizing week.

Rumors hit the internet on Monday that Dall'Oglio was dead, amplified on Wednesday with announcements by both the British-based Syrian Human Rights Observatory and a leader of an opposition party that Dall'Oglio had been executed by the militant Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, considered the local affiliate of Al-Qaeda.

There was no confirmation, however, from the Vatican, the Jesuit order, or the Italian government, and counter-rumors swirled that Dall'Oglio was still alive. A Dutch news agency reported a tip that Dall'Oglio had sent a reassuring text message to a friend in the opposition, but that too remained unconfirmed.

Perhaps by the time this column appears, we'll know something definitive. In the meantime, there was a provocative column on Thursday by veteran Italian journalist Riccardo Cristiano, who works for the state TV network RAI and who's a longtime friend of Dall'Oglio, asking who we really ought to be worried about.

"My dearest Padre Paolo," Cristiano wrote, "it came spontaneously to mind in these difficult hours to ask myself: Who's really dead? Some say you are, but I wonder if it's not actually us."

The world has looked on impotently, Cristiano complained, as Syria has imploded under what he described as "ethnic cleansing and the carpet bombing of entire neighborhoods and villages, along with the terrorism that these outrageous crimes against humanity naturally have produced."

"You couldn't accept living without truth and witness," Cristiano wrote, addressing himself directly to Dall'Oglio.

"We, on the other hand, accept it even today, ready to stay quiet, with blindfolds over our eyes, while we celebrate our summer break. We seem incapable of thinking that August could be a month of 'witness,' with you, for human dignity."

On the subject of staying quiet, U.S. religious freedom activist Nina Shea also published a piece on Thursday accusing the Obama administration of a lethargic response to attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt being carried out by elements of the Muslim Brotherhood, as part of the broader wave of violence currently gripping the country.

Reports suggest there were as many as 30 separate assaults on Christian churches, neighborhoods and businesses this week, with one Coptic Orthodox leader calling the assaults "unprecedented in the modern era."

In his address to the nation on Thursday about the violence in Egypt, Obama did condemn attacks by protesters, specifically adding "including on churches," and also called for greater protection of the rights of "women and religious minorities."

Shea, however, suggested that the administration ought to threaten to withhold the \$1.3 billion in military aid the U.S. provides to Egypt each year until it does a better job of keeping its Christians safe.

Whatever the right policy response, it's clear that the fate of the Christian minority in both Syria and Egypt is up for grabs right now. What's less certain is whether Christians in other parts of the world will offer lively expressions of concern and solidarity ? or whether Cristiano will end up asking the same provocative question about us.

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