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

Diplomats; atheists; Newark, N.J.; and the war on Christians

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Rome

A pope plays many roles, one being the premier ambassador for Catholicism (and religion generally) on the global stage. In a sense, it requires the art of diplomacy: reaching across divides, finding ways to communicate with people who don't speak your language, and emphasizing common ground rather than drawing lines in the sand.

Francis has shown himself to be awfully good at that part of the job, which may help explain why he seems increasingly inclined to turn to churchmen with a strong diplomatic background to fill his administration's key slots.

Indeed, one surprising twist to his papacy is that it seems to be shaping up as a golden age for Vatican diplomats.

Not long ago, conventional wisdom had it that the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio was bad news for the Secretariat of State, the Vatican's ultra-powerful coordinating department, which is typically led by veterans of the diplomatic corps. Frustration with perceived dysfunction in the Secretariat of State, symbolized by the Vatican leaks scandal, was a large part of the reason why the cardinals elected a Latin American outsider in the first place.

Some clipping of the wings is indeed underway. Naming a council of eight cardinals as advisers probably means the Secretariat of State won't be this pope's primary sounding board, and because Francis is living in the Casa Santa Marta rather than the Apostolic Palace, the Secretariat of State doesn't have the same capacity to act as a gatekeeper.

Yet as Francis has made important personnel decisions during his first seven months, his fondness for diplomats has become unmistakable.

- On June 15, Francis named a personal delegate to the troubled Vatican bank, turning to Italian Msgr. Battista Ricca, a veteran Vatican diplomat who served in Congo, Algeria, Colombia, Switzerland, and Trinidad and Tobago, and who later returned to Rome to direct four clerical residences, including the Casa Santa Marta. Even after sensational charges in the Italian press that Ricca had engaged in gay affairs while in Uruguay, Francis has stuck by his man.
- On July 24, Francis named Leo Cushley the new archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh in Scotland, probably the lone appointment in the English-speaking world so far in which the new pope was directly involved. It was a keenly anticipated choice because of the scandals surrounding Cardinal Keith O'Brien, and to fill the role, Francis turned to the head of the English-language desk in the Secretariat of State and a former Vatican envoy in Egypt, Burundi, Portugal, South Africa and the U.N.
- On Aug. 31, Francis picked his new Secretary of State, arguably the most important job any pope has to fill. He tapped Italian Archbishop Pietro Parolin, widely considered one of the most able Vatican diplomats of his generation, who formerly served as the Vatican's deputy minister for foreign relations.
- On Sept. 20, Francis named the only new heads of Vatican departments he's announced to date (though

he's confirmed several others), tapping Archbishop Beniamino Stella to run the Congregation for Clergy and Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri to head the Synod of Bishops. Both come out of the diplomatic corps. On the same day, Francis confirmed yet another Vatican diplomat, Cardinal Fernando Filoni, as prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

It's telling that when Benedict XVI had to dispatch a new nuncio to help deal with a sex abuse scandal in Ireland in 2011, a job for which he might naturally have chosen a diplomat, he turned instead to a theologian, Archbishop Charles Brown. When Francis had to choose a new archbishop to deal with another sex abuse mess in Scotland, a job for which he might naturally have chosen a local pastor, he turned to a diplomat.

What's this romance with diplomats about? At least five factors may be involved.

First, there's the biographical fact that as an outsider to the Vatican, Francis has a smaller pool of people whom he may feel he knows well enough to trust with important assignments. Many of the diplomats he's tapped have been in Latin America at one stage, giving Francis some insight into their aptitudes. Parolin was in Venezuela; Baldisseri served in Paraguay and Brazil; and Stella was the papal nuncio in Cuba.

Second, Vatican diplomats tend to have a deeply global perspective both on statecraft and on church affairs. The first pope from the developing world would want his senior staff to be conversant with realities outside the West, and turning to the diplomatic corps is a way to make that happen.

Third, in terms of church politics, Vatican diplomats tend to be orthodox on doctrine but moderate and pragmatic in application. That's a good fit with the emerging style of the new pope, who doesn't seem inclined to make sweeping changes in teaching but wants to project a more compassionate and merciful tone.

Fourth, Vatican diplomats tend to be emphatic about presenting the whole of Catholic social teaching, from its pro-life elements to its concerns with poverty, war and the environment. That dovetails with Francis' determination to shift the focus to some extent away from the Western culture wars.

Fifth, Vatican diplomats are also schooled in phrasing the church's messages in a way nonexperts can understand and appreciate. One of Francis' favorite nostrums in Argentina was that the church needs to get out of the sacristy and into the street; diplomats form the lone stratum of church officialdom that spends their careers almost entirely outside the sacristy.

To be sure, there are some who worry about this reliance on diplomats, fearing it could perpetuate the status quo Francis was elected to fix.

On background, one Latin American cardinal told me this week he fears that some ringleaders of the Vatican's old guard may be subtly nudging their protégés onto the pope's radar screen in hopes of curtailing whatever reforms Francis may want to launch. Further, because roughly 75 percent of Vatican diplomats are Italians, some see relying on them as a way of reinforcing rather than breaking the Italian stranglehold on power.

Others, however, find that concern exaggerated, arguing that Francis has a good eye for talent as well as a history of not allowing anybody to manipulate him.

However one analyzes it, the broad trend line seems clear.

Under Benedict XVI, a background in theology or canon law was considered a reliable indicator of someone who might move up the ladder. With Francis, anyone looking to spot rising stars might do better to study their passports rather than their curriculum vitae.

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Speaking of trend lines, it may be that before very long, there won't be a single atheist intellectual left in Italy who hasn't received a personal letter from a pope.

On Sept. 11, news broke that Francis had written a long letter [1] to Eugenio Scalfari, one of the founders of the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* and a nonbeliever, replying to some questions Scalfari had posed in a column. This week, Benedict XVI held serve [2] with his own letter to atheist mathematician and philosopher Piergiorgio Odifreddi, who in 2011 published a book challenging Benedict's take on Jesus of Nazareth titled *Dear Pope, I'm Writing You*.

My stories on both letters can be found on the NCR Today blog [3].

To make the spirit of détente even more palpable, Scalfari was the guest of honor Wednesday at an event sponsored by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture called the "Courtyard of the Journalists," where he and Italian Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi staged a mutual admiration society while discussing truth, faith and the message of Jesus.

Both the letters from Francis and Benedict were deeply gracious. Francis wrote Scalfari that God's mercy "does not have limits" and therefore, it reaches nonbelievers too, for whom sin would not be the lack of faith in God, but rather, failure to obey one's conscience. In a similar vein, Benedict thanked Odifreddi for seeking "an open dialogue" on matters of reason and faith, prompting the atheist thinker to say that despite their differences, they have one aim in common: "The search for the truth, with a capital 'T'."

It's indicative of the contrasting fortunes of the two popes, however, that the letters played to very different reviews. Francis basked in near-universal acclaim, while Benedict drew fire for two reasons: First, because he used the letter to defend his record on the sex abuse crisis, insisting, "I never tried to cover up these things," and inviting critics to outline what they see as his failures; and second, for going public at all after having vowed to remain "hidden from the world" in retirement.

I was asked Wednesday on CNN if Francis would be ticked off that Benedict has broken his silence, to which my basic answer was that I doubt it, in part because he's always shown great esteem for his predecessor and in part because he's a strong enough leader no one feels any confusion about who's in charge.

Now for two quick footnotes from Wednesday's "Courtyard of the Journalists" event.

First, Ravasi continues to earn the title I've previously bestowed on him as "the most interesting man in the church," once again spicing up the conversation with some unexpected one-liners and novel turns of phrase.

For instance, Ravasi asserted tongue-in-cheek that Jesus was the first to tweet, pointing out that many of his most famous sayings -- such as "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" -- actually contain fewer than 140 characters.

More seriously, Ravasi said three distinctive features of Jesus' communications style -- short but memorable "tweets," the use of parables, and the bodiliness of his preaching -- are also characteristic of Pope Francis and may help explain why the new pontiff is such a sensation.

Scalfari, for his part, called Francis a "revolutionary" and said he worries we'll never see a "Francis II."

At another point, Ravasi used a bold phrase to underline what believers and nonbelievers have in common. Referring to the despair of Jesus on the cross, Ravasi said it expressed the "salvific atheism of Christ" --

meaning, he explained, that by having fully assimilated the agony in human experience that often leads people to reject belief in God, Jesus opened to door to salvation.

Second, there was a grand irony listening to Ravasi and Scalfari's opening remarks. While the believer Ravasi quoted Marshall McLuhan, Hannah Arendt and Plato, the atheist Scalfari basically cited only one authority, Jesus of Nazareth, while also talking about how much he owed to the Jesuits and the Franciscans.

Both men, in other words, seemed determined to use points of reference the other could easily grasp, which in itself seems a sort of model for dialogue.

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On the subject of episcopal appointments in the context of sex abuse scandals, Bernard Hebda was appointed Tuesday as the new coadjutor archbishop in the Newark, N.J., archdiocese in the States, where Archbishop John Myers has come under fire for his handling of cases in both Newark and his previous post in Peoria, Ill.

Myers, now 72, has strongly defended his record, but some observers couldn't help but see the appointment as a sort of rebuke, or at least as a signal that Rome thinks Newark needs help.

I spoke to both Myers and Hebda by phone Tuesday from Rome, and both insisted that's not how they read the move.

"This was my own decision," Myers said, saying he had asked the Vatican for a coadjutor.

"At no time was there any hint of a reprimand ... If that were the case, if they thought a problem needed fixing, they probably would have given [the coadjutor] special faculties" in specific areas, Myers said.

Myers insisted he and Hebda are old friends and said his appointment will "provide continuity as we go forward." He also pointed out that among himself and the four auxiliary bishops in Newark, three are now over 70 years old, so the 54-year-old Hebda can help "look to the future."

Hebda, an old Rome hand who served in the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts from 1996 to 2009, argued that the tendency to see the appointment of a coadjutor as a sign of crisis may be outdated. He noted that in recent years, coadjutors have been named to Cincinnati, Houston and Los Angeles, suggesting that by now, it may simply be a standard way to ease the transition in complex dioceses.

In any event, Hebda said when he was informed of the appointment, "Nothing was said to me about any difficulties here."

In a possible acknowledgment of the pain caused by abuse cases, Myers said he hopes part of his legacy in Newark will include that "I loved and cared for a lot of people, including the victims of priests and other employees of the archdiocese."

I reminded Hebda of the vision Pope Francis has laid out for the kind of bishop he wants: a shepherd who "has the smell of his sheep," someone who is "meek, patient and merciful," and a leader who doesn't have the "psychology of a prince."

"Is that you?" I asked.

"I hope so," he said, acknowledging that Francis "has raised the bar pretty high for all of us."

On the other hand, Hebda said, the goodwill generated by Francis also makes his job easier.

"So many people are coming back to the church, saying they've had positive impressions of the pope," he said. "It gives the bishop new opportunities and helps him enormously in his day-to-day work as a shepherd."

Myers said Hebda "will be involved in everything" over the next three years, and Hebda said rather than coming into the position with some bold new vision for Newark, he wants to first learn the lay of the land.

"I want to meet people, learn about the institutions, and see where I might be able to contribute," he said.

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Talk of Vatican reform is all the rage right now, and one idea floating through the ether is to fold all the departments devoted to some aspect of Catholic social teaching -- Cor Unum, the Council for Justice and Peace, the Council for Migrants and Refugees, and maybe also the Council for Health Care -- into one super-office for the social Gospel.

Whatever merit that idea may have, we've also gotten a reminder this week of why having separate offices devoted to these subjects has its advantages.

First up was the Council for Migrants and Refugees, which staged a press conference Tuesday to present Pope Francis' message for the "World Day of Migrants and Refugees," set for Jan. 19.

"Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity," Francis wrote in his brief message [4]. Reprising a now-familiar theme, the pope said mistreatment of migrants is part of what he's often denounced as a "throw-away culture."

Francis called for serious efforts to address poverty, which he said often drives people to migrate, and for international cooperation to tackle problems that individual countries can't address on their own. In language with obvious relevance for immigration reform debates in the United States, the pope also suggested that public discussion about migrants is often driven by "suspicion and hostility."

"There is a fear that society will become less secure, that identity and culture will be lost, that competition for jobs will become stiffer and even that criminal activity will increase," the pope said. He called on the media to report not only isolated cases of misconduct but also "the honesty, rectitude and goodness of the majority."

Next came the Council for Justice and Peace, which held its own press conference Thursday to unveil an Oct. 2-4 conference on the 50th anniversary of *Pacem in Terris*, the 1963 peace encyclical of Pope John XXIII.

The press conference provided a welcome relief from the usual insider baseball of Catholic discussion, affording top officials of the council, including Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana and Bishop Mario Toso of Italy, to address a staggering cross-section of external questions, including reform of the United Nations, water as a source of global conflict, and the best way to engage Islam.

Listening to Turkson talk about the water question was, by itself, worth the price of admission. Among other things, he explained how Chinese mining companies have fallen upon his native Ghana in the fever of a gold rush, polluting rivers in the search for precious metals and thereby denying local populations traditional sources of fresh water.

Describing the upcoming conference, Turkson said one of the issues it will consider is what he called the "new frontiers of peace," including "the persecution of Christians in the world." In light of recent anti-Christian

violence in both Pakistan and Kenya, I asked if there was any particular project or initiative regarding anti-Christian persecution Turkson's council was considering.

In response, he said he hopes the Vatican's representatives to international bodies such as the United Nations and the European Parliament can raise the profile of the issue. He also talked about the difficulties of engaging Muslims on the issue, saying that because Muslims "believe they have the final revelation," they often "don't enter into dialogue believing they have anything to learn."

For instance, Turkson said when some Muslim nations wanted to press the United Nations to adopt a resolution condemning religious defamation, Christian leaders asked them to also support a resolution against religious persecution, but with limited success.

In light of the ferment, this may be a good moment to remind readers that I have a new book that comes out Tuesday, *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution*. Information can be found here [5].

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