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The Italian Journalist Deserves an Apology

Ken Briggs | Oct. 6, 2013 NCR Today

My, oh my, such fuss over the details of what the soon-to-be Francis did right after the vote was in.

Eugenio Scalfani, the veteran Italian interviewer from La Republica, said he was told by then Archbishop Bergoglio that he was momentarily mind boggled and drifted to the periphery to get his head straight. He then, as reported, had a mystical revelation and took the job.

From the first, the seemingly trivial details of that report have irritated Vatican operatives. Where exactly did he go? Scalfani, they said, took no notes and didn't record the session, raising suspicions about his accuracy on the particulars. Meanwhile, the public and the pope himself were apparently content with the story as it appeared -- the important thing is that the nominee took a couple of minutes to hear his inner spriit, then gave thumbs up.

Two theories as to what's going on here.

One, that the Vatican operatives and their allies are losing control of a story that was once tightly managed by themselves. The iron curtain of secrecy was crumbling, thanks to the freewheeling Francis who broke recent tradition by giving interviews and making candid comments about his dislike of insider Vatican behavior. The message managers were therefore scrambling to regain a measure of clout as the true witnesses and interpreters.

Two, that some who foster a perfectionist, even infalliblilist, ideals of Sistine Chapel elections panic at even a hint that the conclave's choice could harbor a moment of serious doubt, though saying no is formally an option. Therefore they rush in to "correct" the story in the name of protecting the papacy.

Whatever the ultimate truth of the matter, the ensuing storm has perhaps inevitably led to efforts to blame the press for the peripheral stuff. The insinuations that Scalfani got some of the stuff wrong could have some merit, but nobody seems to be talking to him. And Francis looks as if he stand by the story. I think Scalfani deserves an apology.

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