

Francis' 'older son' problem; red herrings; and pingpong on financial reform

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 11, 2013 All Things Catholic

If a Las Vegas casino had opened a betting line eight months ago on the likelihood that within a year the most popular figure on the planet would be the pope, one has to imagine the odds would have been awfully long.

Yet that's basically today's situation, as Francis continues to garner acclaim and admiration from almost every quarter, most recently for a moving Oct. 4 visit to Assisi and for confirming his desire to reach out to divorced and remarried Catholics by announcing a Synod of Bishops in October 2014 dedicated to the family and marriage.

The "almost" in that sentence, however, is important because while Francis remains a smash hit overall, he's also got a budding "older son" problem.

The reference is to the parable of the prodigal son, a template many observers are now applying to Catholic reaction to the new pope. Over his first eight months, Francis basically has killed the fatted calf for the prodigal sons and daughters of the post-modern world, reaching out to gays, women, nonbelievers, and virtually every other constituency inside and outside the church that has felt alienated.

There are an awful lot of such prodigals, of course, which helps explain the pope's massive appeal.

Yet there are also a few Catholics today who feel a bit like the story's older son, wondering if what they've always understood as their loyalty to the church, and to the papacy, is being under-valued.

One can spot at least three such groups:

- Some Vatican personnel who have tried to do their best over the years in service to the successor of Peter and who may feel a bit demoralized hearing the pope describe their work environment as infested with careerism, "Vatican-centrism," and the "leprosy" of a royal court.
- Some pro-life Catholics who feel like they've carried water for the church on controversial and sometimes unpopular issues such as abortion and gay marriage and who now get the sense the pope regards some of their efforts as misplaced or over the top.
- Some evangelical Catholics, both clergy and laity, who've tried to reassert a strong sense of Catholic identity against forces they believe want to play it down, who now feel the pope may be pulling the rug out from under them. Some leaders in the reborn genre of Catholic apologetics, for instance, weren't thrilled recently to hear Francis call proselytism "solemn nonsense."

For the moment, whether those perceptions are justified, and to what extent, isn't really the point. They're out there, and people with their ear to the ground in these circles seem worried about it.

On Tuesday, renowned Italian Catholic writer Vittorio Messori published a front-page essay in *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's paper of record, acknowledging the "nostalgia" some people in his circles are feeling for Pope Benedict XVI. He reminds them that for believers, loyalty to the pope, whoever he is, "is based on something very different from personal sympathy."

Messori first came to prominence as the author of *The Ratzinger Report*, a blockbuster interview with the Vatican's then-doctrinal czar, and also produced *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* with Pope John Paul II in 1994. That history gives him strong credibility, especially in more conservative Catholic circles.

Indirectly, Messori's message seemed to be: You may not like it, but Francis is the pope, so get in line.

Another Italian writer, Andrea Gagliarducci, published a piece capturing what some Vatican insiders are thinking these days.

"It seems now that what people outside the church think is more important than what people inside the church think," Gagliarducci wrote. "The Vatican [under Pope Francis] turns to VIPs to promote what it does, and never thinks about valuing the high professionals it already has."

Having spent most of the last three weeks in Rome, my sense is that internal Vatican reaction to the new boss remains strongly positive. There's satisfaction that some long-due reforms may finally be implemented, and anyway, it's hard not to like the feeling that you're on a winning team.

At the same time, I also heard some grumbling along the lines of, "I wish he'd stop taking potshots at us."

At one level, Francis shouldn't be unduly troubled. Change always breeds resistance, but he's got massive grass-roots support. Yet there are two reasons to suspect that over time, he'll take the sensitivities of these older sons to heart.

First, he obviously prizes unity in the church, having devoted his entire general audience to precisely that subject Sept. 25.

"It's important to seek to build communion, to teach communion, to get the better of misunderstandings and divisions, starting with the family, with the ecclesial reality," the pope said that day. "Our world needs unity, we need reconciliation and communion, and the church is the home of communion."

Knowing that some Catholics may be feeling abandoned as the train leaves the station, he'll doubtless look for ways to bring them on board without betraying his core vision or sense of priorities.

Second, Francis is politically astute enough to know that sooner or later, he's going to need some of those older sons to get things done.

A member of the pope's new Council of Cardinals told me recently that Francis has expressed concern about the pastoral care of Vatican personnel, wanting to make sure they feel valued as people and not just as cogs in a machine. As part of that picture, he'll no doubt be attentive to the potentially demoralizing downside of his sharp language about the place's culture -- however necessary it may be to say those things in the first place.

In the Gospel parable, the father eventually notices his older son's resentment and pulls him aside to assure him, "Everything I have is yours." At some stage, Pope Francis may need to have such a moment with his own older sons (and daughters).

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On Monday, a mid-level Vatican official I've known for a long time, who's not a native English speaker, thanked me for teaching him the meaning of the expression "red herring."

He told me he'd been up late the night before reading reactions to a story I pursued over the weekend about a relatively minor error in the sensational recent interview Pope Francis gave to Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari. He discovered that some readers felt I was pursuing a "red herring" and, puzzled about what that meant, he Googled the phrase -- delighted, in the end, about expanding his English vocabulary.

To recap, Scalfari at one stage has Francis saying he left the Sistine Chapel before accepting the papacy, stopping to pray in a small room where he had a quasi-mystical experience that dispelled his anxiety. In fact, Scalfari got things slightly out of sequence. The pope's moment of prayer came later, after he had already accepted -- an easy enough mistake to make, given that Scalfari didn't record the conversation or make notes at the time, reconstructing the pope's words later.

I understand why some people feel this is much ado about nothing, and [I've written that it doesn't change the substance](#) [1] of what Scalfari remembered Francis as saying, which has been confirmed by other sources: The new pope had a brush with the divine that night that filled him with a sense of peace and that may help explain the boldness he's shown ever since.

Before closing the book on the story, two final notes.

First, there's a time-honored script of Vatican fusspots trying to edit or correct a bold pope, burned in the memories of a certain generation of Catholics from the time of Pope John XXIII.

However, I honestly don't believe that's what happened in this case. On the contrary, the Vatican repeatedly has confirmed that the Scalfari interview is trustworthy and only issued a written statement Oct. 5 acknowledging that one scene had been jumbled after repeated questions from reporters.

Moreover, the statement came from Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica of Salt and Light TV in Canada, who helps the Vatican with English-language media and who is an unabashed Bergoglio enthusiast. There may be people one might reasonably suspect of trying to trim the pope's sails, but Rosica really isn't among them.

Second, because [I quoted Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York](#) [2] on Saturday about the mix-up, some speculated Dolan was attempting to discredit Scalfari's entire interview or even to undercut the pope himself. For the record, let me be clear: The only reason Dolan commented on it at all is because I asked him to. He didn't initiate the conversation, and didn't even know I was planning to bring it up until we sat down.

In reality, any cardinal who witnessed the scene in the Sistine Chapel would have said the same thing. I only turned to Dolan because I was seeing him that morning anyway, as he happened to be in Rome. (As a reminder, it's no violation of conclave secrecy to talk about what happened after the election because the conclave is technically over.)

It would be nice to live in a world in which a relatively small correction to the historical record wouldn't immediately be assumed to betray a vast political agenda -- nice, that is, but maybe not terribly realistic.

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I've said before that tracking the story of financial reform in the Vatican is often like watching a pingpong match. For every sign of progress, there's usually also a reminder of the work left to be done.

So it was again this week, as the Vatican under Francis adopted a tough new anti-money-laundering law and continued to promote change at the Vatican bank at the same moment that Italian prosecutors continued to garner stories of corruption and shady practices from a former Vatican accountant.

The new law, formally "Law N. XVIII of the Vatican City State on the Matter of Transparency, Vigilance and Financial Information," was adopted Tuesday and announced Wednesday. In essence, it establishes the Financial Information Authority, a watchdog unit created under Benedict XVI, not only as the Vatican's financial intelligence unit with the power to flag suspect transactions, but also as its "prudential supervisor," which means anybody who wants to conduct financial operations in the Vatican needs its approval.

The law also creates a sanctions regime for violation of anti-money-laundering protocols in an effort to bring the Vatican's legislation in line with internationally accepted standards.

The bottom line is a significantly enhanced role for the Financial Information Authority (known by its Italian acronym, "AIF"), which may well need to add staff over time to do its work effectively. The law also charges the government of the Vatican City State under Italian Cardinal Giuseppe Bertello with responsibility for overseeing a "black list" of at-risk subjects.

Moneyval, the Council of Europe's anti-money-laundering agency, is set to discuss a progress report on the Vatican's transparency efforts during its plenary assembly Dec. 9-13 in Strasbourg, France. Since the new law responds to a core concern identified by Moneyval in its 2012 evaluation, which was the need for independent regulation of entities such as the Vatican bank, it may increase the chances that the progress report is basically positive.

The new law is the fourth time in the last three years the Vatican has announced changes to its anti-money-laundering rules.

Its original anti-money-laundering statute, known as "Law 127," was adopted in December 2010 under Benedict XVI to great fanfare. However, the law was then modified in January 2012 in a way many observers took to make AIF subservient to the Vatican's Secretariat of State -- according to critics, thereby compromising the effectiveness of the new transparency regime.

The modifications unleashed strong internal debate, with both Cardinal Attilio Nicora, appointed by Benedict XVI to oversee AIF, and Ettore Gotti Tedeschi, then the president of the Vatican bank, warning that the changes would be seen as a "step back." Those memoranda became public as part of the Vatican leaks scandal.

The new law arguably vindicates Nicora and Gotti Tedeschi because it beefs up AIF's authority while relegating the Secretariat of State to a "coordinating role" regarding state-to-state interactions.

French Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, in effect the Vatican's foreign minister, said Wednesday that the new law is designed to allow the Vatican to play a role of "leadership and example" in the international community.

As a footnote, there continues to be speculation in Rome that when the music stops on Vatican reform, the various financial offices -- the bank, the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See, the government of the Vatican City State, etc. -- will be combined into one large department. Many believe the leading candidate to head that Ministry of the Treasury is Bertello, and the fact that his role was enhanced by Francis in the new law has fueled the theory.

Also this week, a commission to study the Vatican bank created by Pope Francis had a working meeting and was scheduled to see the pontiff Friday. The commission is led by Italian Cardinal Raffaele Farina and includes two Americans: Msgr. Peter Wells of the Secretariat of State and Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard law professor and former U.S. ambassador to the Holy See.

According to news reports, the bank now has flagged approximately 1,300 accounts that lack adequate documentation or belong to entities that don't have the right to deposit funds, representing \$440 million in assets. The review is being conducted by the U.S.-based Promontory Group, an international consulting firm specialized in regulatory compliance.

At the same moment these markers of progress were rolling out, Msgr. Nunzio Scarano, the former Vatican accountant arrested in June for involvement in \$26 million cash smuggling scheme, was still being interrogated by Italian investigators, with details from those conversations becoming a regular feature in the local papers.

On Oct. 3, [news broke](#) [3] that Scarano had claimed that the Administration of the Patrimony of the Holy See (APSA), the department that manages the Vatican's physical properties and investments, operates like a "parallel bank," allowing lay VIPs to participate in its funds, and that officials at APSA routinely accept lavish gifts from banks in exchange for moving deposits around.

On Wednesday, another story based on the Scarano interrogation broke, this time focusing on the Institute for the Works of Religion, better known as the Vatican bank. Scarano apparently claimed he was able to arrange accounts at the bank for various Italian fat-cats under favorable conditions without having to declare where the money came from or what it was being used for.

The story contained excerpts from a wiretap of Scarano before his arrest in which he bragged to a friend that he arranged a series of perks at the bank for one businessman "that not even the pope enjoys."

The story also quoted from the paperwork the investigators filed to justify that wiretap, in which they complained that it's basically "impossible" to follow money once it enters the Vatican bank because assets are mixed together in a way that makes it difficult to identify the "provenance or final destination" of any particular deposit.

As [I've written before](#) [4], one has to take the testimony of an accused party with a grain of salt. That said, Scarano probably will continue to dole out sensational charges that, if nothing else, will keep the spotlight trained on whether Francis and his team are really able to engineer a financial glasnost.

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