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Germany; Lefebvrists; papal cold calls; Legionaries; and Lampedusa

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Over the centuries, the first tremors of earthquakes in Catholicism often have been felt in Germany. That nation gave birth to the Protestant Reformation, and it was also where the theological energies that erupted in the Second Vatican Council began to swirl.

Ralph Wiltgen captured the second point in the title of his famous 1967 history of Vatican II, *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber [1]*.

Given that history, it's worth casting an eye on Germany these days to track the fallout of the "Francis effect." Two recent storylines are intriguing in that regard.

First, the Freiburg archdiocese recently issued a 14-page pastoral manual outlining circumstances under which divorced and civilly remarried Catholics might be readmitted to the sacraments, including Communion. That move compelled the Vatican to issue an Oct. 8 statement [2] urging church leaders to wait for reforms to be adopted in Rome before implementing them on the ground.

Second, Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst of Limburg is currently basking in global celebrity as the "bling bishop" because of widely circulated accounts [3] of how much he's spent on remodeling his residence -- $42 million in all, including almost $22,000 for a bathtub. Francis dispatched an investigator to Limburg in September, and this week, Tebartz-van Elst was in Rome [4] for meetings while calls for his resignation mount.

(Proving he's not completely tone deaf, the bishop took the budget carrier Ryanair for the trip.)

If these are early warning signs of something bigger, what might it be?

In the case of Freiburg, it's the danger of expectations. Catholics of a certain age will recall the atmosphere back in 1963, when John XXIII created a commission to study birth control that continued under Paul VI. The takeaway was that the church was on the brink of changing its teaching, so much so that people remember priests saying from the pulpit they no longer needed to confess using contraception because all that was about to disappear.

Of course, Paul VI eventually affirmed the traditional ban with *Humanae Vitae*. Wherever one stands on the merits of the encyclical, there's no denying that people hoping for change were massively disappointed, and the fault lines that opened up scarred Paul's papacy from that point forward.

Similarly today, Francis has created palpable expectations of change in the rules regarding divorced and remarried Catholics. Once again, there's a widespread sense that it's only a matter of time, and Freiburg illustrates the understandable temptation to jump the gun. If the pope's already signaled where we're going, many people may conclude, what's the point in waiting around?

None of this is especially troubling if Francis already has made up his mind. But if he hasn't -- for instance, if

he's open to the possibility that next October's Synod of Bishops might nudge him in a different direction -- Freiburg offers a useful prompt that it might be a good idea to say so out loud.

As for Limburg, it illustrates a striking feature of Francis' management style that we might dub "leadership by shaming."

It's not clear if Francis will impose discipline on Tebartz-van Elst by removing him from office or naming a papal delegate to administer some aspects of the diocese, including its finances.

In some ways, however, all that may be superfluous, because he's already brought a hammer down simply by offering such an unmistakably different vision of what leadership in the church is supposed to look like.

As a thought experiment, ponder whether this story would have become a cause célèbre during the Benedict years. I suspect the answer is no, because what makes it so jarring, and so irresistible from a media point of view, is the contrast between Tebartz-van Elst and his new boss.

The headline has been, "This bishop didn't get the memo."

Of course, Francis' embrace of simplicity arises out of his own personality and spiritual convictions. However, he's also politically savvy enough to realize that it hands a club to the world to beat up on bishops who don't follow suit.

In other words, Limburg illustrates that Francis may not always need to exercise the formal powers of his office in order to turn the screws on recalcitrant middle managers. Sometimes it's enough merely to set a different example then let public opinion do the work.

The Lefebvrists and a Nazi war criminal

One can debate what the election of Francis means on other fronts, but there's no doubt that it heralded the closure of the window that opened under Benedict XVI for reconciliation with the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, popularly known as the Lefebvrists.

Francis doesn't feel the same affection for the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, nor the same impulse to reintegrate its devoteés. He's already taken steps that have set off shock waves in traditionalist circles, including a ban on celebration of the old Mass [5] by the Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate and replacing five consultants in the Office for the Liturgical Celebrations known for their high church tastes.

Italian commentator Sandro Magister recently said Francis seems "friendly to everyone, except the traditionalists." The feeling is apparently mutual; during a stop in Kansas City, Mo., the head of the society, Bishop Bernard Fellay, reportedly described Francis as "a true modernist," understood in his circles as the ultimate in pejoratives.

If that picture was already clear, it probably was set in cement this week with the fracas in Rome surrounding an effort by the Society of St. Pius X to celebrate a funeral Mass [6] for convicted Nazi war criminal Erich Priebke, who died Oct. 11 at the age of 100.

Priebke was sentenced to life imprisonment (the last part under house arrest) in Italy for the 1944 Ardeatine caves massacre in which 335 Italians, including 57 Jews, were executed in reprisal for an attack on German troops. By his own admission, Priebke personally shot two of the prisoners and supervised the deaths of the others.

Priebke never expressed remorse, insisting he was following orders, and after his death his lawyer released a

testament in which Priebke essentially denied the Holocaust, claiming that alleged crematoria in Nazi concentration camps were actually large kitchens for feeding inmates. (That brought a good line from Renzo Gattegna, president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, speaking Wednesday at a ceremony recalling the 70th anniversary of the deportation of Roman Jews: "Yesterday, the Nazis assassinated human beings," Gattegna said. "Today they assassinate history.")

The Vicariate of Rome, which runs the diocese for the pope, announced Oct. 12 it would not allow a church funeral for Priebke, who considered himself a Catholic. Enter the Society of St. Pius X, which offered to host the funeral Tuesday in one of its chapels in Albano, the hillside area outside Rome near the pope's summer residence of Castel Gandolfo.

That set the scene for chaos. A small delegation of neo-Nazis traipsed out to Albano, where they were met by a large crowd of locals opposed to hosting the funeral, as well as a phalanx of police. A melee ensued, including police firing tear gas into the crowd, and in the end the car carrying Priebke's remains was forced to turn back without the funeral taking place. Two neo-Nazis were arrested in the wake of the episode.

One can assume Francis is taking a personal interest in all this, in part because Priebke fled to Argentina after the war and lived comfortably in a Buenos Aires suburb for 50 years before his 1996 extradition.

Granted, the decision to celebrate a funeral for Priebke came from the Italian branch of the Society of St. Pius X, not its headquarters in Écône, Switzerland. Granted, too, Fr. Pierpaolo Petrucci, the society's superior in Italy, said it "had nothing to do with politics or even with Priebke," but rather the Christian duty to send off "a dead man who during his life went to confession and received Communion."

That said, for a pope who co-authored a book with a rabbi, who recently said it's impossible for a Christian to be anti-Semitic, and who may feel a bit of national shame over the fact that ex-Nazis could live so long undisturbed in his own backyard, the association of the Society of St. Pius X with the memory of Priebke may solidify his instinct that this is a window best left closed.

The cold-call pope strikes again

I've written before that among his many other innovations, Francis has emerged as "the cold-call pope," frequently ringing up people he's never actually met for a chat. That continued in mid-October when Francis called Andrea and Tahereh Sciarretta, a couple in the Italian city of Chieti who have a 17-month-old infant suffering from a grave spinal disorder and who had written the pope about their situation.

Naturally, the Vatican doesn't announce these calls or release transcripts, in part because Francis makes them himself so his handlers don't even know they've happened until after the fact.

If the world learns about the conversation, it's because the other party says something, which runs the risk that whatever the pope said may be distorted in the retelling.

For instance, the Sciarrettas are currently trying to secure experimental stem cell therapy for their daughter, a procedure that has been blocked by the Italian Ministry of Health. Some news reports about the pope's phone call suggested he had expressed support for their request, even that he had promised to intervene with the Italian authorities.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, was compelled to deny those reports "in the most absolute terms," saying the pope had indeed called the Sciarretta family to express his closeness and to promise prayer, but that he did not take any political position.

The episode illustrates a deep headache facing Vatican communications personnel these days. Given Francis' free-wheeling and spontaneous style and his penchant for expressing himself outside the usual channels, how do they short-circuit confusion while not trying to tie the pope's hands -- an exercise, for anyone who knows Francis, that likely would be fruitless in any event?

To some extent, Lombardi and others find themselves trapped in a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" dynamic.

If they try to clarify whatever Francis said, people will accuse them of editing or correcting the pope, casting them as Vatican Blue Meanies [7] who fear losing their grasp on power, as blowback from their recent, and utterly benign, attempt to set the record straight [8] on a point of fact from Francis' interview with Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari illustrates.

On the other hand, if they stay quiet, misrepresentations may metastasize.

One solution would be for Francis to make his own clarifications, given the widespread "hermeneutic of suspicion" about statements coming from anybody else. The difficulty with that, also illustrated by the Scalfari affair, is that Francis may shrink from doing so because he doesn't want to embarrass someone. (A source who spoke directly with Francis about the interview said the pope conceded Scalfari's recollections were a little "imaginative" in places, attributing it to Scalfari's advanced age.)

In any event, the conundrum is unlikely to go away. It seems clear that Francis is willing to run the risk of being occasionally misunderstood as the price to be paid for not walling himself off from direct contact with the outside world.

Pope Francis and the Legionaries of today

The embattled Legionaries of Christ recently announced that a general chapter meeting will be held beginning Jan. 8, billing it as the next step in their recovery from the scandals surrounding their founder, the late Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado.

This week, a new hiccup, albeit a relatively minor one, emerged with reports claiming that the former rector of a Legionaries university in Rome, Fr. Paolo Scarafoni, is among the persons of interest in an Italian civil investigation of rigging competitions for teaching positions. (The Legionaries issued a statement saying no one has informed them that he's a target.)

To be honest, the situation has little to do with the Legionaries. The charge is that a network of influential Italian "wise men" conspired to make sure their protégés, in some cases their own children, got teaching positions at a series of universities despite the fact those jobs were supposed to be awarded on the basis of open competitions.

It's a juicy story for the Italians, mostly because five of those alleged "wise men" are also jurists tapped by Prime Minister Enrico Letta to advise the government on constitutional reform. Reportedly, prosecutors have wiretaps that reveal these VIPs putting in the fix.

One of the campuses allegedly involved is the European University of Rome, founded by the Legion of Christ in 2004. It remains to be seen whether the charges have any merit and to what extent Scarafoni, who stepped down as rector Sept. 11, may have been involved.

The Legion has pledged to cooperate fully with the Italian probe, and they'd probably be well advised to follow

through.

So far, Francis doesn't seem to have any prejudice against the order. On Aug. 30, he appointed a prominent Legionary named Fr. Fernando Vergez, previously the head of the Vatican's telecommunications department, as the new No. 2 official in the government of the Vatican City State. The pope made Vergez a bishop on Tuesday.

That benevolence could disappear, however, if Francis were to get the impression that the Legion's past isn't really in the past.

Here's the full statement from the Legionaries, translated from the Italian:

"In reference to stories reported by some newspapers, the European University wishes to communicate that at the moment, no information has reached it regarding the involvement of ex-rector Fr. Paolo Scarafoni LC in an investigation by authorities in Bari regarding rigged competitions. To be precise, Rector Scarafoni, in respect to the competition in question, approved one delay in its conclusion until June 17, 2011. The competition, in fact, never took place. The European University, confident of the correctness of the actions of Rector Scarafoni, is ready to cooperate with the investigating authorities in order to bring the truth of the situation to light."

The future of African immigrants

Pope Francis gave a plug to the Community of Sant'Egidio during his Oct. 6 Angelus address, when he saw a banner from the movement in St. Peter's Square. He exclaimed, "*Sono bravi questi di Sant'Egidio!*" -- meaning, roughly, "These Sant'Egidio people are great!"

Born amid the European student protests of 1968, Sant'Egidio began as a home for progressive young Italians who wanted to remain Catholic. Over the years, it's become a primary carrier for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, as well as the church's social Gospel.

One familiar Sant'Egidio face is Mario Marazziti, for years the community's spokesman and now a member of the Italian parliament and president of its Committee for Human Rights. Marazziti recently sent along an essay and some pictures from a trip to Lampedusa, an Italian island in the southern Mediterranean that serves as a major point of arrival for immigrants from Africa and the Middle East seeking to reach Europe.

On Oct. 3, a boatload packed with more than 500 Eritrean men, women and children capsized off Lampedusa and caught fire, with just 155 survivors and 364 dead bodies recovered. In itself, there was nothing unusual in the disaster, as more than 20,000 people are believed to have perished over the last decade making the 70-mile crossing. Given the staggering numbers of dead this time, however, the incident made global headlines.

Pope Francis devoted his first trip outside Rome to Lampedusa [9] back on July 8, condemning what he called a "globalization of indifference" to migrants. For a brief time, it seemed the Oct. 3 tragedy might change things, as Italian Prime Minister Letta promised a state funeral for the victims, legislators talked about getting rid of Italy's harsh law criminalizing "clandestine status," European authorities pondered more humanitarian ways of dealing with immigrants, and humanitarian groups around the world mobilized to help the survivors.

A scant two weeks later, however, it already seems the wind has gone out of the sails. While the Italian government dithered over the details of a state funeral, the dead were interred without ceremony because their decomposing bodies posed health risks. Survivors, meanwhile, are facing criminal investigations for illegal entry while they languish in *bidonvilles* composed mostly of cast-off mattresses and mud.

Marazziti spent time with the survivors, collecting the stories of how they ended up on that boat. From Eritrea, he discovered, it took them two months to arrive in Khartoum, Sudan, having been blackmailed along the way

by immigration "brokers" and human traffickers. They spent a year in Khartoum as virtual slaves, begging to collect enough money to pay off the brokers who took them to Tripoli in Libya. They spent additional months in Tripoli, scraping together the $1,600 a head it cost to make the final stage of the journey -- which, of course, ended in death for most.

Marazziti is pushing a multipoint program to try to avoid such tragedies in the future:

- Construction of additional refugee centers on Lampedusa. At present there's just one, with space for 250 people, though the number of migrants on the island at any one time is usually more than 1,000. (Marazziti notes that Andrea Riccardi, the founder of Sant'Egidio, had allocated funds for a new center while he was a minister in the government of former Prime Minister Mario Monti, but it was never built.)
- Creating the possibility of legal entry into Europe, including the rapid processing of requests for refugee status and asylum. "Anything that lengthens the routes to entry," he argues, "is a way to increase the number of deaths and to fatten the human traffickers."
- Opening offices to process requests for asylum on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, in Tunisia and Libya, by drawing on European consulates and embassies.
- Creating a European Immigration Office in North Africa, which, he argues, would "break human trafficking" and "make possible legal trips ... people could come by paying a fee on a normal ship or ferry boat."
- Creating a European Welcome and First Aid Center in Sicily, where applications for asylum in all 28 European nations could be handled.
- Opening a "humanitarian corridor" in the Mediterranean Sea, with radar banks in Libya and Tunisia to identify boatloads of migrants and patrol ships capable of ensuring that these people remain safe, wherever they finally end up. Marazziti calls it "humanitarian patrolling," saying it's the only way to curb the "pandemic of death."

Lest anyone think all that amounts to unilateral surrender in the face of illegal immigration, Marazziti insists the movement of peoples from South to North today is a "structural part of this phase of globalization."

In other words, Marazziti believes economic and cultural realignments are fueling movement across international borders, and throwing up higher walls or adopting harsher laws won't change that dynamic. The choice, as he sees it, is whether the world will treat these people humanely or stand back and watch more of them die.

For the record, Marazziti notes that many of these migrants are Christians, suggesting an additional motive for their fellow Christians in the West to be concerned.

It remains to be seen how much luck Marazziti will have in pushing his agenda. What seems more certain is that when Francis called the Sant'Egidio crowd *bravi*, this is the sort of thing he had in mind.

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