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

Hackett interview; Gotti Tedeschi; Lefebvrists; and speaking dates

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 25, 2013 All Things Catholic

Using categories made famous by Joseph Nye, the United States is the world's leading "hard power" and the Vatican among its most influential "soft powers." In that light, one way of defining the role of a U.S. ambassador to the Holy See is getting these two superpowers in sync on shared humanitarian concerns: feeding the hungry, fighting poverty, curbing war, fostering dialogue, and so on.

If that's the job, there's a strong case that few people ever have been more qualified for it than Ken Hackett.

A native of West Roxbury, Mass., Hackett joined Catholic Relief Services, the overseas charitable agency of the U.S. bishops, in 1972 and spent the next 40 years serving the poor in the name of the Catholic church. He took over as executive director in 1993 and as president in 2003 until his retirement in December 2011.

Although Hackett doesn't have previous experience as a diplomat, it's almost impossible to name a corner of the world where he hasn't gotten mud on his boots over the years, learning the situation and getting to know the players both in the church and in government and humanitarian circles. He and his wife, Joan, had their first child on assignment in the Philippines, their second in Kenya.

He's also an old Rome hand, having played leadership roles both in Pontifical Council Cor Unum, the Vatican agency that oversees charitable activity, and Caritas Internationalis, the Vatican-based confederation of Catholic humanitarian groups. Since Francis has a penchant for entrusting senior Vatican positions to former diplomats, Hackett is especially wired since he knows many of them from their previous postings around the world.

Because CRS relies heavily on American public funding -- an estimated $500 million a year between grants and donated goods -- Hackett also understands the U.S. government's humanitarian policies and agencies about as well as any single figure in Catholic life possibly could.

Bottom line: The Obama administration may have its issues with the church in other areas, but most observers say it made a smart choice in Hackett. He's launched a blog [1] about his experiences.

Hackett presented his credentials to Pope Francis on Monday, marking the formal beginning of his tenure as ambassador. He sat down Thursday for a telephone interview with *NCR*.

***Allen*: What was your experience of presenting your credentials to Pope Francis?**

Hackett: It was magnificent and inspiring. I'd been told by other ambassadors that the Holy Father generates a personal connection with you, and they were right. We had a translator because my Italian isn't quite there yet. He spoke mostly in Spanish and me in English, though he understood most of the English. I gave him a little bit of my background, though he had already been briefed.

As it happens, I had been in the previous day to the government of the Vatican City State to see Cardinal [Giuseppe] Bertello, whom I had visited on a number of occasions when he was the nuncio in Rwanda. When

the genocide broke out, he had to leave, and I told him about visiting his residence afterward and seeing gaping holes in the ceiling above his living room and his bedroom where mortar shells had hit. The conversation resurrected some images for him that he had left behind. [Bertello] suggested that I should talk to the Holy Father about the genocide because he probably didn't know much about it. I did, and the Holy Father was very interested, given his deep compassion for the poor and the marginalized. It was a moving experience because I had a colleague with me, a former vice president at CRS, who's married to a Rwandan who lost 58 members of her family in the genocide. Understandably, she was in tears.

Beyond that, we talked about some of the major challenges facing the world: Syria, peace in the Holy Land, Iran and the hope for progress regarding their nuclear program, migration issues, and so on. We didn't go into any great depth, but he was enormously receptive. At the end, he said, "I'm praying for you, I'm praying for your president, and I'm praying for peace."

How do you see the role of the U.S. embassy to the Holy See?

My role is to represent the president and our government to members of the Roman Curia and to the Holy See generally on issues that are a priority for us, recognizing that the Holy See is truly global in its reach and often has access to information and insight about situations around the world that other diplomatic channels do not.

There are many, many issues where the U.S. government finds not just common cause with the Vatican, but a real convergence of priorities. The list includes trafficking in persons, international humanitarian development, [and] refugee matters, not to mention the situation of Christian minorities around the world. That's something the Holy See is deeply concerned about, as are many of the religious communities based here in Rome.

Do you have any personal goals as ambassador?

What I'd like to do is to tap into the network of contacts I developed over the years at CRS, all the people I've met around the world, and be a listening ear for them and a source of encouragement. For one thing, lots of these folks offered me a meal and a bed at various times, so I'd like to offer them the same hospitality here. Beyond that, I'd like to help make sure their voices are heard because many of them come from places to which we often don't pay much attention.

I recently had the bishop from Djibouti here, and some religious sisters from Algeria, and a bishop from Haiti, and one from Nigeria. These are all people I know who have a wealth of experience and wisdom, and I hope I can open up new connections with them both for our government and for the Holy See.

Secretary of State [John] Kerry has made the engagement of religious leaders a priority, recognizing that they often supply vision and inspire action that makes a real difference, whatever their faith may be. I'd like to contribute to that effort by being a convening agent, bringing people together.

How do you think the election of Francis has affected the Vatican's diplomatic profile?

From my one month now of closely watching what's happening here, I think we're seeing a new force for good [in Francis] that's only going to grow in intensity. He has already become a rallying point for hope across globe among people of all faiths.

Last night, I was with some people from the Simon Wiesenthal foundation, who naturally are Jewish, along with some Muslims they invited. Their concern is religious tolerance, and they all told me how overwhelmed they've been by the actions Francis has taken and the words he's offered. They see him as a powerful encouragement and inspiration.

At the general audience yesterday, [Archbishop Georg] Gänswein told me there were 92,000 people registered that day, with maybe 50,000 more people in the street. They've never had numbers at audiences like that before. Francis has the power to inspire people and to provide leadership on important issues that flow out of his faith in a way that's capturing everyone.

Diplomatically, I can say that every ambassador I talk to here says their governments now are investing more energy in inquiring about what's going on in the Vatican. They want to know what Francis' priorities are going to be and what he might have to say about major world issues.

The Obama administration has had a mixed relationship with the U.S. bishops. Does that have any impact on your ability to engage the Vatican?

I don't feel negatively affected by it at all. I believe there are far more issues where our government agrees with the Holy See as opposed to the relatively few areas of disagreement, and that's where I'll put my emphasis. I'd say the same for the church in the United States. There are actually many more issues where the church and the bishops are in sync with the administration, although the ones that get attention tend to be where there's disagreement.

Are you concerned about giving "cover" to an administration that some Catholics in the United States see as hostile?

I'm not troubled by that. Aside from all the areas of convergence the church and the administration have, I also believe that when there are disagreements, we have to dialogue rather than throwing bricks at one another. That's not just my sense of things, because I've talked to many bishops who say they're pleased with my appointment.

The American Life League recently asked aloud if Catholic Relief Services is a "pox on the church," objecting to instances in which CRS collaborates with groups that don't share church teaching on matters such as abortion and contraception. Does that kind of criticism, which has come up before over the years, color how you're received in the Vatican?

It hasn't so far, and why should it? CRS does marvelous, heroic work around the world, and so many people inside the Curia and elsewhere in town have experienced its programs firsthand. I don't think they're especially concerned about critics who find one or two things wrong in an organization that sponsors $800 million worth of programs every year, that operates in 100 countries and has more than 5,000 staff. Sure, things can always go wrong and there can be a mistake here or there, but the basic reaction to CRS I get in Rome is gratitude. If anything, it's usually, "By the way, can you do more?"

In general, I wouldn't put much stock in detractors who don't have mud under their toes because they haven't been working in the tough places.

During his first term, President Barack Obama visited Pope Benedict. Has there been any talk about a meeting during his second term with Pope Francis?

I raised that with people at the White House and got an enthusiastic "yes," but at this point, there's no sense of a date. Secretary Kerry, by the way, has also expressed interest in meeting the pope.

Pope Benedict's right-hand man speaks

Although Gänswein is an archbishop and prefect of the Papal Household, to most folks in the Vatican, he's still "Don Giorgo," the cleric who rose to fame as the secretary and right-hand man to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and then Pope Benedict XVI.

Like his mentor, Gänswein has been keeping a fairly low profile, though on Tuesday he gave an interview to veteran Vatican writer Franca Giansoldati of the Italian daily *Il Messaggero* that contained a few interesting tidbits.

Among the highlights:

- Gänswein admits that his unprecedented role of serving two popes at first created "some difficulties, some unpleasant experiences of misunderstanding and jealousy," but says that in the meantime, "the waters have calmed down."
- He confirms that Benedict has no intention of publishing theological works while he's still alive: "Ratzinger the theologian knows that his every public word would attract attention, and anything he says would be read as being either for or against his successor."
- Gänswein also denies that having two living popes creates confusion about who's in charge: "Anyone who knows Benedict knows that this danger doesn't exist. He's never injected himself, and he won't, in the government of the church. It's not in his nature." He also says there's a relationship of "sincere respect and fraternal affection" between Francis and Benedict.
- In typically ordered German fashion, Gänswein says Benedict's days in his monastery on Vatican grounds are "well planned out." The pope emeritus, he says, prays, reads, listens to music, replies to correspondence (of which, Gänswein says, there's a lot), and receives visitors. Every afternoon, he says, the two of them pray the rosary together while walking in the garden behind the monastery.

From a news point of view, probably the most interesting element of the interview came in the last question, regarding the May 24, 2012, firing of Italian economist and banker Ettore Gotti Tedeschi as president of the Institute for the Works of Religion (IOR), better known as the Vatican bank.

Gänswein says he remembers that day well, partly because it was the same day that Benedict's butler, Paolo Gabriele, was arrested as the mole at the heart of the Vatican leaks scandal. Gänswein insists there was no connection between the two events, "only an unhappy coincidence, even diabolical."

Here's what he says about Gotti Tedeschi: "Benedict XVI had called Gotti to the IOR to carry forward the policy of transparency, and he was surprised, very surprised, by the vote of no confidence in him."

(Gotti Tedeschi was dismissed following a vote of no confidence by the bank's board of superintendence, a five-member group of laity that includes Carl Anderson, head of the Knights of Columbus. The board released an unusually harsh memo outlining nine alleged failures on the part of Gotti Tedeschi.)

"The pope respected [Gotti Tedeschi] and liked him," Gänswein said, "but out of respect for the competence of the people who had the responsibility, he chose not to intervene at that time." Gänswein also adds that after the firing, Benedict remained in contact with Gotti Tedeschi "in a discreet way."

The drama surrounding the ouster of Gotti Tedeschi remains one of the unsolved mysteries of recent Vatican life.

Friends of the 68-year-old continue to insist he got a raw deal. Some believe he fell victim to a power grab

while others are convinced he was making too much noise about changes to a Vatican money-laundering law that some saw as a step backward. (Internal debates on this point were revealed as part of the leaks scandal.) Still others say he ran afoul of the Vatican's old guard when he voluntarily agreed to be deposed by Italian civil investigators looking into allegedly suspect transactions at the IOR.

Under those scenarios, Gotti Tedeschi would basically be a martyr to the cause of transparency and reform.

Critics insist his ouster had nothing to do with competing visions of the bank's future, but rather interpersonal difficulties and lapses in management. Anderson asserted at the time that Gotti Tedeschi "failed to perform his basic responsibilities, to inform himself about what the board was doing, and to participate in meetings."

Though the Gänswein interview doesn't resolve that debate, it does amount to a sort of "rehabilitation" from Benedict XVI, since Gänswein clearly suggests Gotti Tedeschi still enjoys Benedict's confidence.

Gotti Tedeschi perhaps can take some satisfaction not only in that, but in the fact that many of the reform measures he advocated have since been adopted. A new anti-money-laundering statute promulgated by Francis on Oct. 8 restores the basic framework of the original law, even expanding the powers of the Vatican's financial watchdog unit, while a detailed review of accounts at the IOR is going on under new President Ernst von Freyberg and the bank recently issued an independently audited balance sheet.

A final note on a Nazi war criminal

I've probably already devoted more space to the fracas in Rome over the idea of a Catholic funeral for convicted Nazi war criminal Erich Priebke than it's worth. As a final note, the leader of the Italian branch of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X this week gave an interview explaining their decision to say a funeral Mass for the architect of the 1944 Ardeatine massacre.

In the end, the funeral never happened, capsized by a melee between neo-Nazis and outraged locals. Priebke's lawyer had turned to the Lefebvrists after the Vicariate of Rome, which governs the diocese in the name of the pope, refused to allow a funeral in one of its churches.

Fr. Pierpaolo Petrucci, superior of the Italian district of the Society of St. Pius X, insists in the interview that hosting a funeral had nothing to do with honoring Priebke's memory or denying the Holocaust, but rather obedience to church law.

"The refusal by the Vicariate to permit a funeral for a baptized person who had received the sacraments of confession and the Eucharist, whatever his failures and sins may have been, was not in conformity with the law of the church and with Catholic doctrine," Petrucci said.

"After confirming that Priebke had been baptized and received the sacraments, this decision seemed to us a grave injustice with regard both to the dead person and the family," he said.

In that context, Petrucci couldn't resist a potshot at Pope Francis.

"Never more than today, there's a lot of talk in the church about charity, about love of one's neighbor, especially under this pontificate," he said. "Yet when it's a matter of putting these virtues into practice in coherence with the Gospel, even when it's not politically correct and means running afoul of public opinion and the media, then things change."

Petrucci goes to some lengths to insist that Priebke didn't meet the conditions in canon 1184 of the Code of Canon Law for denying a funeral to "manifest sinners" when the rite would create "public scandal." Whatever

one makes of it, the interview confirms what I wrote last week [2]: The episode puts an exclamation point on the epitaph already written for any realistic hope of détente with the traditionalists on Francis' watch.

See John speak

As this column is posted, I'm on way to Texas for the annual University of Dallas Ministry Conference, held at the Irving Convention Center. My topic this year is "The Franciscan Revolution: Pope Francis and the Destiny of the Catholic Church," and I'll be speaking from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Saturday.

Other upcoming speaking dates:

- Oct. 27-28: Saskatoon, Canada, at the Catholic Health Association of Saskatchewan
- Oct. 29: Newport, R.I., at Salve Regina University
- Oct. 30: Boston at Boston College
- Oct. 31: Waltham, Mass., at Saint Mary Parish
- Nov. 3: Manhattan Beach, Calif., at American Martyrs Church
- Nov. 7: Washington, D.C., at the Catholic Volunteer Network conference

Readers in any of those areas are invited to join the party!

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