

A tick-tock of developments on the pope beat

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 6, 2014 NCR Today

There's simply no down time under Pope Francis, and the past few days have proved the point. Traditionally, the period between New Year's and the feast of the Epiphany, meaning Jan. 1 through 6, is a dead period in the Vatican, but this time, at least eight papal storylines worth noting emerged.

Here's a brief tick-tock of the latest developments on the pope beat.

Denouncing the 'novice trade'

On Saturday, Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor of *Civiltà Cattolica*, released [a set of notes](#) [1] about Francis' meeting with the superiors of men's religious orders on Nov. 29. Among other highlights, Francis said formation isn't a "police action" and that the church shouldn't be shaping "little monsters," and that he wants to revise Vatican guidelines on relations between bishops and religious to better reflect the autonomy of the orders. Francis also denounced what he called a "novice trade," deliberately inviting a comparison with the slave trade, by which he seemed to mean religious orders recruiting new members in the developing world primarily so they can perform menial tasks and take the burden off aging religious in the West.

Dumping monsignors

In what amounts to another blow against what Francis has described as the temptation of careerism in the church, the pope [reportedly has decided](#) [2] that the title "monsignor" will no longer be awarded to priests under the age of 65 and has communicated that decision to his nuncios, or ambassadors, around the world. Those who already have the title will apparently continue to have permission to use it, though in the Francis era, it remains to be seen how many will opt to do so.

World Youth Day deficit

The Rio de Janeiro archdiocese announced Saturday that Francis has pledged to donate \$5 million to help cover an estimated \$18 million debt left over from the July edition of World Youth Day. The debt was originally \$38 million, according to the archdiocese, but has already been paid down by the sale of an archdiocesan building, sales of CD and DVDs from the event, and private donations. The Vatican did not specify where the \$5 million would come from, although the pope has several funds at his disposal, including the annual "Peter's Pence" collection that generally nets between \$60 million and \$70 million.

Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate

Pope Francis' decision earlier this year to impose a commissioner on this small but growing order and to limit their permission to celebrate the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass has been cited by some as a sign of antipathy for the church's traditionalist camp. Vatican sources insist that the motives for the crackdown have less to do with liturgical philosophy than with allegations of financial shenanigans and internal divisions over leadership. *Corriere della Sera* reported Saturday that Francis held a quiet meeting with some members of the order Jan. 1

at Rome's basilica of St. Mary Major, accompanied only by a lone security official and a driver, in order to assure the friars that his intent is friendly.

Same-sex unions

A line from Francis' remarks to religious superiors that spawned headlines in Italy was his insistence that the church must reach out to children in new family situations, including same-sex couples, in order to avoid giving them a "vaccine against the faith." Coincidentally, Italy is gearing up for a debate over the legalization of same-sex unions, and the pope's comment was styled by some as an "opening" to that idea. Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, called the interpretation a "stretch" and said it suggests the pope's words are being manipulated for political effect.

Galantino and 'The Last Shall be First'

Francis' recent appointment of Bishop Nunzio Galantino of the tiny Cassano all'Jonio diocese as the new secretary of the powerful Italian bishops' conference, CEI, was hailed as a classic Francis move, given that Galantino refuses to be called "Your Excellency," has declined to live in the bishops' palace, and is famed for spending time with ordinary people. On Monday, a report in *Corriere della Sera* indicated that Galantino's name had been the very last on a list of possible candidates submitted to the pope, proposed by only one fellow bishop. Assuming it's accurate, the report suggests that Francis is capable of overturning recommendations for personnel moves when he wants to, which may also have implications for the way he handles important choices for bishops.

Francis in the Holy Land

During his Angelus address Sunday, [Francis confirmed](#) [3] he will visit the Holy Land May 24-26, indicating he'll make stops in Amman, Jordan, followed by Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The primary thrust is ecumenical, to culminate in a meeting with the Patriarch of Constantinople and representatives of all the other Christian confessions in the Holy Land at Jerusalem's famed Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This year is the 50th anniversary of Paul VI's 1964 visit to the Holy Land, the first trip by a pope outside Italy in more than a century. The political and regional subtext will also figure on Francis' agenda, including plans for a dinner with Syrian refugees in Amman the evening of May 24. The high-wire act Francis will walk is already clear from complaints in the Israeli media that the only major public event on the pope's calendar is tentatively scheduled for Bethlehem, which lies in Palestinian territory.

The pope as bishop of Rome

Francis was scheduled on Monday afternoon to head out to the Roman parish of Sant'Alfonso sulla Giustiniana in order to see a living nativity set organized every year by members of the working-class parish. The pope was invited in a letter sent by youth from the parish, and three days ago, as is his wont, he picked up the phone and called the pastor to say he was coming. In Rome, the gesture was taken as another indication of Francis' zest for spending time with ordinary people, as well as his determination to take seriously his role as the bishop of the local diocese.

Papal voicemail

Francis is famously the "cold-call pope," constantly phoning people out of the blue, and on New Year's Eve, he left a message on an answering machine for a small Carmelite community in Lucena, Spain, to wish them a happy new year and to mark the community's 400th anniversary. When the startled nuns passed the recording on to a Spanish Catholic radio network, it swiftly made the rounds of the world. Francis later called back and caught the sisters at home, reportedly urging them never to lose hope or to succumb to sadness.

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