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Truisms in Catholic life and a rundown of Rome news

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 24, 2014 All Things Catholic

Trying to impose order on chaos, I'd like to suggest that recent developments on the Vatican beat are noteworthy not just on their own merits, but because they illustrate a couple of truisms about Catholic life that anyone who wants to "get it" vis-à-vis the church probably should master.

Those truisms are:

- Sometimes in the church, restraint is as powerful a tool of reform as action.
- There's a constant back-and-forth in Catholicism between doctrinal clarity and pastoral flexibility, and focusing on one in isolation from the other distorts reality.

Now for developments that put meat on the bone of these maxims.

Restraint as reform

Italians love nothing as much as a good *giallo*, meaning a mystery story or a scandal, and at the moment, a couple of especially juicy ones with Vatican overtones are coursing through the Italian bloodstream.

One pivots on a shady Italian financier with links to the country's intelligence services named Paolo Oliverio, who's currently facing a criminal probe for various forms of financial fraud. Among the claims made by prosecutors is that Oliverio helped engineer a phony police interrogation of two members of the Camillian religious order back in May so they'd miss an election for a new superior, thereby allowing the incumbent, Fr. Renato Salvatore, to stay in office.

Salvatore has also been arrested as an Oliverio crony, among other things allegedly turning a blind eye while he bilked a Camillian hospital in southern Italy out of more than $13 million. (The Camillians, named for St. Camillus de Lellis, were founded in the 16th century with the mission of ministering to the sick and running hospitals.)

Witnesses have told prosecutors that Oliverio boasted of relationships with various Vatican departments, including the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, the Vatican's powerful missionary arm that controls considerable real estate in Rome and throughout Italy. Oliverio also claimed ties to some Vatican heavyweights, including Italian Cardinal Angelo Amato, prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Oliverio told investigators, for instance, that he helped make arrangements for VIP passage at airports in Rome and Bari for a 2013 trip by Amato.

Among the other things investigators want to know is whether Oliverio exploited those Vatican connections to advance his schemes.

Another scandal back in the news this week involves Italian Msgr. Nunzio Scarano, known derisively as "Monsignor 500 Euro" for the large bank notes he liked to flash around. A former official at the Administration

of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See (APSA), which administers investments and real estate for the Vatican, Scarano ostensibly earned a modest Vatican salary of $40,000 yet managed to own several buildings and apartments in his native Salerno in southern Italy, as well as an extensive art collection including originals from Chagall and Van Gogh.

Police originally arrested Scarano back in June for allegedly participating in a scheme worthy of John le Carré to smuggle $30 million in cash into Italy from Switzerland on behalf of a family of Italian shipping magnates, a plot that supposedly featured a private jet and a former agent of Italy's equivalent of the CIA.

This week, Scarano faced another arrest warrant on charges of money laundering, as prosecutors charged he paid around 60 people in cash to write checks to him for roughly 10,000 euro, then used those checks to create a false paper trail to cover as much as $10 million stashed in various accounts, including the Vatican bank.

(As a footnote, prosecutors in Salerno issued a formal request to the Vatican this week to freeze Scarano's accounts at the Vatican bank, but a spokesman for the bank told *NCR* that had already been done back in July when the original charges surfaced. They also say that a full report on Scarano's accounts was submitted to the Vatican's criminal tribunal, which has opened its own investigation.)

Faced with the clamor these two storylines are generating, the Vatican response so far has been a deafening silence.

Not so long ago, one could have counted on somebody loudly questioning whether civil investigators were overstepping their boundaries by intruding on the Vatican's sovereign autonomy. One recalls, for instance, that when former Naples Cardinal Michele Giordano learned his phone had been wiretapped as part of an investigation of a real estate scam orchestrated by his brother in the late 1990s, the cardinal testily snapped, "I could have been talking to the pope!"

It's also easy to imagine that someone might have implied, if not stated outright, that these investigations are part of a political, media, and judicial campaign to drag the church through the mud, that the charges themselves are false or exaggerated, or that the Vatican's role in the story is so negligible as to make even mentioning it gratuitous.

This time around, however, Vatican officials seem content to allow the criminal probes to play out without protest or perceptions of interference.

While Francis has not put out a formal gag order, people who otherwise might have been inclined to pop off seem to have gotten the memo: If transparency and accountability are the new watchwords, then doing or saying anything that smacks of obstruction of justice is probably not a good career move.

Discretion, in other words, isn't only the better part of valor. In the Catholic church, sometimes it's a large part of reform.

Doctrine and pastoral practice

Anyone who knows the inner reality of Catholic life is well aware that at the retail level, there's always a sort of negotiation that goes on between what the rules say and what actually happens. It's not about hypocrisy or disobedience, but adapting universal norms to the infinite complexity of real-life human situations.

I was once at a talk given by a senior Vatican official when a questioner said he had a sin he wasn't ready to confess but still felt drawn to receive Communion, even though the rules say he shouldn't.

"The law of the church is clear," the official responded. "You have to go to confession first." Then the official said, "But now let me talk to you person to person. As a priest, I can't substitute my conscience for yours. I can't tell you to go or not to go. You have to make that choice in conscience, always bearing in mind that it must be a well-formed conscience."

That's the Italian view of law, which permeates the psychology of the church -- law is an aspiration, not an absolute, which must be adapted to individual circumstances.

This truism is especially topical this week in light of an unusual, though hardly unprecedented, public spat between two cardinals.

Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras was tapped back in April as coordinator of Francis' new Council of Cardinals and has emerged as a point man for the pope's reform agenda. German Cardinal-designate Gerhard Müller, meanwhile, has been confirmed by Francis as prefect of the powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, making him the pope's top theological advisor.

In a Jan. 20 interview with the German paper *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, Rodriguez Maradiaga was asked about a recent article by Müller in which he seemed to close the door to new flexibility on admitting divorced and remarried Catholics to the sacraments. In effect, Rodriguez Maradiaga advised the doctrinal czar to loosen up [1]
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"He's a German, one has to say, above all he's a German theology professor, so in his mentality there's only truth and falsehood," Rodriguez Maradiaga was quoted as saying. "But I say, my brother, the world isn't like this, and you should be a little flexible when you hear other voices. That means not just listening and then saying no."

It's impossible to miss the conflict between the two Princes of the Church, and among other things it suggests that October's Synod of Bishops on the family, where the issue of Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics will be on the table and where both Rodriguez Maradiaga and Müller should be present, will be great theater.

Looked at another way, however, one could argue that the two cardinals weren't so much disagreeing as giving voice to two different pieces of the Catholic puzzle, which would be incomplete without either one.

When Müller published his essay in *L'Osservatore Romano* in October, his mission was to lay out church teaching on the indissolubility of marriage -- in other words, to bring clarity to doctrine. Rodriguez Maradiaga, on the other hand, was speaking from the pastoral experience of trying to apply that teaching to real-world judgment calls.

To extend the image, perhaps the transition from Benedict to Francis could be analyzed not so much as a shift in substance, but in the balance of power between the church's theologians and its pastors. (Those are, of course, caricatures, because a theologian can be imminently pastoral, just as some pastors can be remarkably dogmatic.)

Aside from the fact that it's cardinals rather than the usual cast of pundits and bloggers, the only atypical feature of this crossfire may be that for once, the pastoral end of the argument is getting as much attention as the doctrinal. Usually Catholicism is terrific about communicating its doctrine, not so much its pastoral nuance.

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Here's a run-down of other storylines from Rome over the last week, a week that, typically in the Francis era, was chock full of intriguing developments.

Medjugorje: On Monday, a commission created under Benedict XVI and presided over by Italy's powerful Cardinal Camillo Ruini submitted the results of a four-year inquest into the alleged apparitions and revelations of the Virgin Mary at Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It will be up to Francis to decide what to do, though some felt he tipped his hand in mid-November during a homily in his morning Mass in which he said that Mary "is not a postmaster sending messages every day." In the Jan. 23 edition of *Corriere della Sera*, famed Vatican writer Vittorio Messori said it'll be a painful decision whichever way it goes: If Francs rules the apparitions are false, millions of faithful who flock to Medjugorje will feel deceived and betrayed; if he says they're authentic, it would be "devastating" for canon law, which leaves to the local bishop the right to judge such phenomena in his diocese, and two bishops in a row have said no. For that reason, Messori predicted the ruling will be that "for now" there's no proof these events are supernatural rather than the more definitive, "there's proof they're not supernatural."

Legionaries: The Legion of Christ, the embattled religious order that has become a symbol of the church's sexual abuse scandals, posted an announcement Monday that its general chapter meeting that opened Jan. 8 had shifted into the phase of electing new leadership. The outcome is certain to be keenly scrutinized, in part to judge whether the new boss has any ties to the order's disgraced founder, the late Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, and in part to see if the new man seems to embody a reform agenda. No announcement can be made until Pope Francis signs off on the results, which are intended to end three years of papal receivership. On Wednesday, one former Legionary who says he was abused by Maciel beginning at age 12 described the general chapter [2] as a "damage control operation" and expressed skepticism that it would undo the order's "internalized corruption." Three American Legionaries taking part in the general chapter gave an interview to *NCR* the same day in which they pled with critics [3] to "give them a chance," listing several areas in which they believe reform is already underway.

Davos: Popes send messages to various events all the time, but it's an index of the cachet Francis presently enjoys that his brief appeal to the World Economic Forum in Davos on Tuesday actually made news. "I ask you to ensure that humanity is served by wealth and not ruled by it," Pope Francis said in the message read at the opening ceremony by Cardinal Peter Turkson, president of the Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice. Specifically, Francis called on the rich and famous congregated at the Swiss resort to pursue "a better distribution of wealth, the creation of sources of employment and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality." In a CNN analysis piece [4], I suggested it's easy to think that no one, not even a pope who's also presently among the most popular figures on the planet, can bring down entrenched systems of power and privilege. Of course, I noted, that's also what people said about communism before John Paul II.

Communications: Speaking of messages, the Vatican released a papal message for World Communications Day on Thursday [5], with Italian Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, describing it as a "profoundly Franciscan text." Devoted to how the media can promote what Francis has described as a "culture of encounter," the text calls for greater patience in the media, as well as a way of telling stories that doesn't end up feeding the prejudices of one camp or another. (In another vintage Francis touch, he said that dialogue presupposes Christians don't insist their ideas are the only ones "valid or absolute.") In a Vatican news conference to present the document, I asked Celli if the idea of greater patience in a media climate with ever-tighter deadlines and nearly instantaneous news cycles didn't risk coming off as sweet but terribly unrealistic. His response was that faced with an "ever more frenetic spiral" of information, many people today feel "nostalgia for silence." Joining Celli was Italian media expert Chiara Giaccardi, who said there's a small "Copernican revolution" in the message in terms of defining communication not as "the

transmission of content" but rather "the reduction of distance." As a footnote, both speakers demonstrated good communications technique by not subjecting journalists to the interminable reading of prepared texts, talking briefly and off the cuff.

U.S./Vatican Relations: It was hard to miss the contrast on Wednesday, which was the 41st anniversary of the *Roe* v. *Wade* decision in the United States legalizing abortion, between tweets dispatched by Pope Francis and President Barack Obama. Francis sent out a message endorsing the March for Life in Washington, D.C., while Obama tweeted on the importance of a woman's right to choose. The contrast suggests that when the two men meet March 27 in the Vatican, they'll have plenty to talk about. In the meantime, the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See organized a reception Thursday to mark the 30th anniversary of the launch of bilateral relations between the Vatican and the United States, which date to 1984 and the Reagan administration. U.S. Ambassador Ken Hackett was the host, while French Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Vatican's foreign minister, gave a brief talk. Mamberti largely focused on the history of U.S./Vatican ties and why they matter, though he went out of his way to issue a reminder of America's tradition of religious freedom -- a point that has become a major preoccupation for the bishops of the United States amid their struggles with the Obama White House over the contraception mandates imposed as part of health care reform.

Hollande: As this column was being put to bed, Vatican-watchers were atwitter with anticipation for Friday's tête-à-tête between Pope Francis and French President François Hollande. In part, the buzz is because Hollande has made four previous trips to Rome without bothering to see the pope, but now that his popularity has plummeted while Francis enjoys an 85 percent approval rating among French Catholics and non-Catholics alike, all of a sudden, Hollande has "gotten religion." In part, too, there's curiosity as to whether the soap opera around Hollande's private life, especially his affair with actress Julie Gayet, would produce any embarrassment. In truth, those bits of subtext are likely to be less relevant than whether Francis satisfies the expectations of some French Catholics that he should take Hollande to the woodshed over his support for gay marriage and legalized euthanasia. A petition in France signed by more than 100,000 Catholics asked Francis to express their "profound malaise and growing concern" when he meets the French president.

Ecumenism: Saturday at 5:30 p.m. Rome time, 11:30 a.m. Eastern in the States, Francis will celebrate an ecumenical vespers service at the Roman Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls to mark the end of the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The event comes on the heels of the pope's Jan. 17 meeting with an ecumenical delegation from Finland, in which the pope basically said he's not ready to throw in the towel on the dream of full visible unity among the various Christian denominations, and ahead of his May trip to the Holy Land, when he'll meet the Patriarch of Constantinople and lead an ecumenical prayer service in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In that context, his words Saturday evening will be closely watched to see if Francis adds anything to his vision for how to move Christian unity forward.

Arturo Paoli: Last Saturday, Francis sat down at his residence at the Vatican's Casa Santa Marta for roughly 40 minutes with Fr. Arturo Paoli, a 101-year-old Italian priest who spent 45 years in Latin America and who belongs to the Little Brothers of the Gospel religious order inspired by Blessed Charles de Foucauld. Paoli is known as one of the forerunners of the liberation theology movement, which was long seen in Rome as a sort of warmed-over version of Marxism, so the pope's welcome for Paoli was taken as another sign of reconciliation with the liberationists. It wasn't the first time the two men had met, since Paoli spent 1960 to 1974 in Argentina and knew the young Fr. Jorge Mario Bergoglio when he was the Argentine provincial of the Jesuits.

Defrocked priests: On Jan. 17, The Associated Press moved a story reporting that 384 Catholic priests had been removed under Benedict XVI for reasons related to sexual abuse in 2011 and 2012, combining those who voluntarily requested an exit with those upon whom dismissal was imposed as a penalty. A Vatican spokesperson issued a denial of the story at 9:31 p.m. Rome time that day, claiming the story was based on confusion between the number of cases opened and the number of dismissals, then retracted it at 10:32 p.m. --

making it a new winner in the sweepstakes for shortest-lived Vatican denial. The confusion played out in real time, with tweets burning up the Internet and news agencies reporting the report, then the denial, then the denial of the denial. In the end, however, the AP report was vindicated. Ironically, the story was basically a good one from the Vatican's point of view, since it suggested vigorous action against abuser priests. Perhaps the mini-tempest suggests another truism: However maladroit the Vatican can be in handling bad news, sometimes they're even worse with good news.

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