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Women; the old guard; pope v. pope; graffiti; and All Things Catholic

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 31, 2014 All Things Catholic

Given the through-the-looking-glass dynamic of the media today, everything Pope Francis says or does is defined as news, however hard it may be to pin down what it means and however often he may have said or done precisely the same thing before.

Thus a short talk Francis gave [1] to an Italian women's center on Saturday made headlines, in this case because of what he said about women in the church.

Here was the line: "I'm happy to see many women sharing some pastoral responsibilities with priests in accompanying people, families and groups, and also in theological reflection. I hope that the spaces for a more capillary and incisive feminine presence in the church will be enlarged."

Never mind that Francis had issued some version of that line at least half a dozen times before or that he added no new concrete detail about what "more space for women" might look like. He uttered the words, so reporters and analysts were obliged to swing into action.

In truth, it's easier to say what "more space for women" doesn't mean in the mind of Pope Francis than what it does. We know he's taken women priests off the table, and we also know he's not interested in naming women cardinals. In his December interview with the Italian paper *La Stampa*, Francis said anyone advocating women cardinals suffers from "clericalism," meaning the idea that to be important in the Catholic church, you have to be a member of the clergy.

In fact, Francis' conception of what "more space" means seems to have little to do with office-holding of any sort.

During his trip to Brazil in July, Francis told the Brazilian bishops that he wanted them to "promote the active role of women in the ecclesial community" because "if the church loses its women ... it risks sterility." That prompted a question on the papal plane about what exactly he meant by "promoting an active role," to which he replied: "It can't be limited to the fact that girls can be altar boys, or that women can be the president of Caritas or a catechist. No! It has to be more than that, profoundly more, even mystically more, and that's why I've spoken about [the need for] a theology of women."

"Women in the church are more important than bishops and priests," the pope insisted. "That's what we have to try to explain better, because I believe we don't have a way of making that explicit theologically."

Here's the key point: When Francis talks about "more space" for women, it's less about creating new roles and more about assigning greater value to the roles women already play. It's psychological, theological and moral "space" he wants to enhance, not so much corporate and institutional.

As a veteran of the pastoral front lines, Francis grasps that if its women were to walk away tomorrow, the Catholic church would come grinding to a halt. He knows it's women who raise kids in the faith, women who

make parishes run, women who keep alive popular devotions and practices, women who mobilize the church's human resources when people are in need, and on and on.

If the Catholic church is a "field hospital," as Francis has put it, he knows that women are its primary medical staff.

That's not to say Francis won't create more "space" for women in the conventional sense of the term. He could, for instance, name a woman as his spokesperson, a job that's generally the second most visible in the Vatican after the papacy. As part of a restructuring of Vatican finances, he could create a new position of comptroller and assign it to a woman, effectively entrusting her with the Vatican's power of the purse. Or, if the much-rumored consolidation of several current Vatican departments into a new "Congregation for the Laity" actually happens, the pope could tap a laywoman to head it.

(That last suggestion might be a bit dicey, because assuming that the new congregation will exercise delegated powers of the pope, some canonists will say that anyone wielding those powers needs to be a cleric. However, if there's one thing we've learned about Francis, it's not to be too dogmatic about what he will or won't do.)

Maria Voce, head of the international Focolare movement, has also suggested that Francis might create a council of lay advisers alongside his Council of Cardinals, a body where women would play a key role.

In the end, however, such steps would be only symbols of what Francis seems to mean by "more space for women."

The substance is a new way of explaining why women actually don't need anybody to lift them up. If people saw the church in the proper light, as Francis understands it, they'd realize that women are already where the action is.

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Pope Francis, along with a couple of kids from Catholic Action, released two doves from the window of the papal apartment last Sunday, one of which was swiftly attacked by a seagull and a crow. In the blogosphere, pictures of the incident triggered a spate of reflections on good vs. evil, the brutality of nature, and so on.

For many Italians, however, the immediate association was more prosaic. During the Vatican leaks scandal, the popular term here for the presumed cabal of Vatican insiders trying to undercut Benedict's "purification" campaign by leaking his secrets was *i corvi*, "the crows," so people wondered if Sunday's symbolism betokens that the old guard is getting ready to go after Francis, too.

It's a fair question, although the reality is that there's increasingly little of the old guard in any position to push back.

On Thursday, Pope Francis made another key personnel move, naming Bishop Giorgio Corbellini [2] to replace Cardinal Attilio Nicora as president of the Vatican's Financial Information Authority, the anti-money-laundering watchdog unit created under Pope Benedict XVI.

Corbellini is a former protégé of Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the current papal ambassador in the United States and the former No. 2 official at the Vatican City State, who challenged patterns of corruption and cronyism. Nicora, on the other hand, is associated with older Italian patterns of doing business.

Nicora served as president of the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See (APSA), the department that handles the Vatican's investments and real estate, from 2002 to 2011. APSA has been in the headlines

because of the scandals surrounding "Monsignor 500 Euro," Nunzio Scarano, a former APSA official who's been charged with money laundering and involvement in a cash smuggling scheme. In turn, Scarano has alleged in interrogations by Italian police that all manner of shady practices were common at APSA, such as officials accepting vacations in five-star hotels and other perks from commercial banks in exchange for parking Vatican funds there.

Those are accusations, not facts, but the fact that Scarano could pass unchallenged in APSA for so long does raise some questions. This is a mid-level official supposedly getting by on a modest Vatican salary, yet he managed to own several properties in his native Salerno and to amass an art collection including originals by Chagall and Caravaggio.

In context, Francis' move to replace Nicora with Corbellini can't help but be read as a desire for a break with the past, even if the new appointment is only *ad interim*.

The shake-up at the Financial Information Authority follows a similar move earlier this month [3] at the Vatican bank, where Francis replaced four of five cardinals who sit on its governance commission. Most notably, he removed Italian Cardinal Taricisio Bertone, the former Secretary of State, on whose watch several memorable scandals unfolded.

In other words, the sort of people one might imagine leading a palace coup are precisely the ones losing their grip on power. Translation: If dove vs. crow symbolizes a looming Vatican conflict, the smart money is probably on the dove.

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By now, many people have commented on the *Rolling Stone* cover story [4] on Pope Francis, particularly the "Benedict bad, Francis good" framework the piece adopted. (Words such as "dour" and "disastrous" about Benedict loomed large.) A Vatican spokesman called the contrast [5] between the two pontiffs "superficial journalism" marked by "a surprising crudeness."

To be fair, comparisons between Francis and his predecessor are inevitable, and there's no getting around the point that Francis is more of a crowd-pleaser. For sure, too, there is a shift in tone under Francis in what could be described as a "moderate" direction, though it might better be expressed as the ascendancy of the church's pastors and diplomats over its theologians and canon lawyers.

That said, it's also clear that Francis tends to get credit for several perceived reforms that actually began on Benedict's watch, especially in two chronic sources of scandal for the church: money and sex abuse.

On money, it was Benedict who created a new financial watchdog agency, who opened the Vatican for the first time to outside secular inspection through the Moneyval process (the Council of Europe's anti-money-laundering agency), and who appointed a new president of the Vatican bank who just released its first independently certified financial statement.

On sex abuse, it was then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who pushed for new rules to weed out abuser priests in the Pope John Paul II years and who wrote those rules into law as pope. It was also Benedict who unleashed his top cop, then-Msgr. Charles Scicluna, on Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado despite the cleric's powerful network of Vatican allies and sentenced Maciel to a life of "prayer and penance" in 2006. Benedict, too, was the first pope to meet with victims of sex abuse, the first pope to apologize for the crisis in his own name, and the first pope to dedicate an entire document to the abuse crisis in his 2010 letter to the Catholics of Ireland.

Ironically, just before the *Rolling Stone* story appeared, The Associated Press broke the news [6] that Benedict

had laicized almost 400 priests over his last two years in office for reasons related to sex abuse, which isn't quite the profile of a pope in denial. If you think about it, that's almost 1 in every 1,000 Catholic priests in the world flushed out of the system by Benedict in just two years.

No doubt Benedict's record on these matters is open to criticism, but there's equally no doubt that he got the ball rolling on reform. In other words, if there's a case for "Benedict bad, Francis good," it's not on these two fronts.

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The identity of the tagger behind the graffiti image of Pope Francis as a superhero [7], which made the rounds earlier this week after the Pontifical Council for Social Communications circulated it on Twitter, has now been revealed.

In truth, Mauro Pallotta wasn't working very hard to keep it a secret, since his tag name is "Maupal," and since he put up the image in the same Borgo Pio neighborhood near the Vatican where he lives. (Here's one detail you may not have caught: He said a red-and-blue scarf sticking out of the bag Francis is carrying in the spray-painted image represents the team colors of the pope's favorite soccer squad, San Lorenzo in Argentina.)

"Because of the empathy that this pope generates, he's very pop," the 40-year-old Pallotta said. "He's the only leader in the world who does what he says and says what he does."

Pallotta said he was delighted when people in the streets protested after city workers arrived to clean the image off the wall, though he said he's sure they'll be back, insisting that city officials lack appreciation for "urban decoration." He was right, as the image was scrubbed off the wall Thursday.

For the record, Pallotta described himself as a nonbeliever and said he likes Francis as a man, not because "I believe in anything."

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This is the last All Things Catholic column I'll write for the *National Catholic Reporter* since on Monday, I'll begin my new assignment as associate editor for *The Boston Globe*.

This column began as "The Word from Rome" on Aug. 31, 2001, with an entry on the soap opera surrounding the on-again, off-again marriage of Zambian Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo to a bride selected for him by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, and I've been filing it on a weekly basis for the last 12 years.

Thanks to everyone who's come along because it's been quite a ride.

I'm pleased to announce that All Things Catholic will live on under the same name in *The Boston Globe*. For those with access to the print edition of the *Globe*, you'll find a short version of the column in the Sunday paper. A longer version, more akin to what I do for *NCR*, will be available at www.bostonglobe.com [8]. That's a pay service (though you get one click free), but readers can always get the column without paying if they access it via Facebook or Twitter. The first column will probably run Feb. 9. (By the way, you can find me on Facebook by searching for "John L. Allen Jr.")

In a little while, my *NCR* email address will no longer work. You can reach me at my new address, which is john.allen@globe.com [9]. My Twitter handle is unchanged at @JohnLAllenJr.

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