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

# An American moment in the Vatican

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 29, 2012 All Things Catholic

For those who can only see the world in terms of left vs. right, recent personnel moves in the Vatican undoubtedly look like the same old stuff on a different day. They include:

- The president of the Vatican Bank was dumped by a supervisory council led by the head of the Knights of Columbus, known for its fierce papal loyalty and its substantial financial contributions to the Vatican.
- A Fox News reporter and Opus Dei member was tapped [1] as the Vatican's new PR guru.
- The pope appointed [2] a trusted aide to lead the Vatican's relations with Catholic traditionalists -- a further sign of how seriously Benedict wants them back.

Politically, all this may seem like just another string of victories for the conservatives. (Alternatively, some of it might be styled as struggles within the conservative camp, since the Vatican Bank president who got bounced was himself a member of Opus Dei.)

Yet if I may make the bold suggestion that we set aside ideology for a moment, there's another lens through which to view what's going on. In effect, we're witnessing the dawn of a new "American moment" in the Vatican.

First, a brief recap of recent events.

In late May, Italian economist Ettore Gotti Tedeschi was sacked as president of the Institute for the Works of Religion, better known as the Vatican Bank. A memorandum explaining the move was produced by the bank's Supervisory Council, a body led by American Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus. Anderson was also the lone member of that body to defend the firing in public, insisting it didn't signify any retreat on the bank's commitment to transparency and playing by the rules.

When a Council of Cardinals, which governs the bank, upheld the ouster, it seemed to put a slammer on Anderson's profile as somebody you don't want to cross, since Gotti Tedeschi was a media darling believed to have support at senior levels.

One month later, another American star rose in the Vatican's firmament. Former *TIME* and Fox News correspondent Greg Burke, who's also a numerary, or celibate, member of Opus Dei, was named Monday to the new position of senior communications adviser.

Finally, on Tuesday, Archbishop Augustine ("Gus") Di Noia, a New York native who's served since 2009 as secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, was named to the newly created position of vice president of the Ecclesia Dei Commission, making him responsible for relations with the traditionalists. Di Noia is a former aide to then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

If someone were to catalogue Benedict XVI's highest priorities at the moment, the list would certainly include these items:

- The "New Evangelization," a revival of the church's missionary energies, one obstacle to which is the bad press the Vatican has drawn over the last seven years;
- The effort to reform the Vatican's financial operations in the direction of greater transparency and accountability;
- Healing the only formal schism to follow the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), meaning the split with the Lefebvrists.

Adding up recent events, Americans are now playing lead roles in all three areas. Strikingly, two hold positions created especially for them, Burke and Di Noia.

One could add at least two other Americans to the mix.

The first is California-based attorney Jeffrey Lena, who's represented the Holy See in litigation in American courts related to the sexual abuse crisis and who for the last several months has been a senior adviser to the Vatican in its efforts to satisfy international standards in the fight against money laundering.

Lena is a great symbol of the new American ascendency, often strolling through Vatican grounds clad like a Berkeley grad student, in khakis and a button-down shirt with his sleeves rolled up, yet drawing snappy salutes from the gendarmes as he approaches the corridors of power.

The second is Archbishop Charles Brown, another former aide to Ratzinger and another New York native, recently dispatched to Ireland by Benedict XVI as his ambassador. The appointment means that in facing the most massive sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic world, as measured in percentage terms, the pope turned to an American.

Over the years, one rap on the Vatican is that even though it purports to be a global institution, it sometimes feels more like an Italian village. It often encapsulates both the virtues of Italian culture, including a keen emphasis on personal relationships and a sense of work as art, and its well-known defects, such as endless tribal rivalries and a penchant for conspiracy theories. The latter have been on clear display during the recent leaks scandal, which has been reported as a Vatican story but which in reality is a classically Italian story.

The new American presence, both out front and behind the scenes, represents a challenge to that milieu. It remains to be seen if it will be stereotypical American virtues -- such as practicality, plain speech and hard work -- or equally stereotypical defects -- such as arrogance and impatience -- that claim the upper hand.

In any event, seeing things this way is far more interesting than the usual filter of "conservative pope making conservative moves."

(Drilling down, this isn't just an American moment, but a St. Louis moment. Greg Burke is a St. Louis native, and his namesake, Cardinal Raymond Burke, who heads the Vatican's highest court, is a former archbishop of St. Louis. Throw Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York into the mix, another St. Louis native who's the Vatican's go-to guy in the States, and you've got a strong Roman footprint for the "Gateway to the West.")

To be sure, Americans don't own the place quite yet. Among other things, arguably the most influential American on the Vatican scene, Cardinal William Levada of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is about to step down.

Yet even if the Vatican remains an Italian village, these days it feels increasingly like one nestled on the Upper East Side of New York, or perhaps the suburbs of St. Louis, where one can always hear some American-accented English wafting through the air alongside the dulcet tones of *il bel paese*.

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On the Burke hire, I can't pretend to objectivity. Greg has a ton of friends in Rome, and I'm a small part of that crowd. Like most people, I've always found him smart, funny, and the just-right mix of healthy journalistic cynicism without being jaded.

Some people who don't know Burke are reacting to his appointment on the basis either of his membership in Opus Dei or his background at Fox News, so let me say a brief word on each.

First, whatever Burke's theological views may be -- and frankly, we've never talked about it that much -- I've never seen him pull his punches on a Vatican story or try to spin away bad news, either when he was writing for *TIME* or at Fox. In truth, sometimes he's taken me to task for being too soft, too willing to allow for an innocent explanation, and I know he's done the same with others.

Second, whatever Burke's politics may be -- and again, we've never talked about it much -- I've never seen it color the way he does his job. Granted, the choice of subjects he's pursued sometimes has been driven by the interests of Fox viewers, such as the rising Muslim presence in European cities. Once he sunk his teeth into a story, however, he played it down the middle and told the truth.

Obviously, the Vatican was never going to hire a radical dissident as its communications chief, or somebody who sees a conspiracy under every rock. Yet in Burke, they've got someone with his feet firmly on the ground, whose piety doesn't blind him to the messy human realities of the church, and who doesn't perceive every question reporters ask as an attack.

In sum, this is probably the best move the Vatican has made on the communications front since Joaquin Navarro-Valls, John Paul's powerful media advisor and spokesperson, stepped down six years ago.

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Burke knows very well that he faces a laundry list of challenges in trying to upgrade Vatican communications. They include:

- The Vatican Press Office, Vatican Radio, Vatican TV, *L'Osservatore Romano*, *Civiltà Cattolica* and the Council for Social Communications are all, in one way or another, perceived as speaking for the Vatican, and sometimes they don't speak with one voice.
- There's an obvious culture clash between the slowness and caution of the Vatican and the 24/7 news cycle of the media business. (One positive bit of fallout from the leaks scandal is that Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, began offering daily news briefings. A daily briefing is taken for granted in every other institution of any consequence, and it's something the Vatican should have been doing all along.)
- There's also a deeply ingrained suspiciousness of the media, most recently expressed by the Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who complained of journalists imitating Dan Brown [3] in their coverage of the leaks scandal in a recent interview with *Famiglia Cristiana*.
- Even if the Vatican could shape a clear message, and even if they could do it fast enough to register in the news cycle, there's nothing to prevent somebody else in the system from blowing it out of the water. Easter 2010 offered a classic example. As sex abuse scandals erupted in Ireland and across Europe,

> raising questions about Benedict XVI's record, the Vatican tried to set a tone of contrition and resolve. Yet on Good Friday, the preacher of the papal household appeared to compare criticism of the church to anti-Semitism, and Cardinal Angelo Sodano, dean of the College of Cardinals, complained of "petty gossip" during the Easter Mass.

The acid test of Burke's effectiveness, therefore, won't be his ability to craft a compelling message or to sell it to the outside world. Instead, it will be his capacity to prevent other people from undercutting that message by saying ill-advised or ill-timed things.

For this to work, Burke needs to be able to walk into Bertone's office before the *Famiglia Cristiana* interview and bluntly tell him, "Eminence, you can't say this." (The argument would be, "Even if some reporters have gone off the deep end, the perception that we're blaming the media is only going to make things worse.") Burke needs to be able to pull Sodano aside and say, "This didn't help ... in the future, talk to me before you sound off."

In all honesty, one of the toughest things to do in the Catholic church is to convince a bishop to shut up if he feels like he has something to say. *A fortiori*, that's even truer of cardinals and Vatican potentates. In the old days, Navarro-Valls had some success along those lines -- though, to be sure, it was far from complete -- largely because everyone knew that John Paul II had his back.

The $64,000 question is, who's got Burke's back, and will it be enough?

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