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Super Mario and the pope, a quarterback controversy, and coming attractions

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 31, 2012 All Things Catholic

On Monday, Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti met Benedict XVI at the pope's retreat in Castel Gandolfo, signifying the end of the summer doldrums. A brief Vatican statement said the exchange focused on the "European situation," understood to mean the Eurozone's massive debt crisis, high unemployment and generally dismal economic outlook.

It was the fifth such encounter since Monti was tapped to lead a technocratic government in November 2011, underscoring the positive vibe between "Super Mario" and the pope.

The parallels are certainly striking. Both Benedict and Monti are low-key figures who followed celebrities, John Paul II and Silvio Berlusconi. Benedict actually is German, while Monti is routinely described as more German than Italian, especially his passion for fiscal discipline. Both are struggling with crises that festered under previous administrations: the sex abuse scandals for Benedict and Italy's $2.5 trillion public debt for Monti.

Here's why all this rates a mention: At a time when church/state relations in many places seem to be deteriorating, including talk of a "war on religion" in America, the simpatico between Monti and Benedict could lead to détente on one of the most perennially contentious political matters of all: money.

Earlier this year, Monti's government announced a host of austerity measures, including revisions to property taxes. Heretofore religious institutions have been exempt, even those that turn a profit, such as hostels and health clinics, on the grounds that they serve a public purpose.

In effect, the government has proposed to reclassify some of those facilities as commercial and insist they pay up.

The church operates roughly 50,000 parishes and oratories in Italy: 11,000 properties used for educational and cultural activities, 14,000 schools, and just under 5,000 hospitals, hospices and health clinics. All will be evaluated, and those deemed primarily commercial could theoretically be asked to pay back taxes dating to 2005. (The change applies to all nonprofits, but numerically, those operated by the church are the most significant.)

Estimates of the total bill for the church vary widely, from as high as $1.5 billion to as low as $125 million.

When the change was announced in February, it set off deep alarms in Catholic circles. In part, that's because eliminating the church's tax exemptions is a signature crusade of Italy's anti-clerical Radical Party. In 2010, the Radicals convinced the European Union to launch an investigation of Italy for alleged violation of EU rules because of the church's tax breaks.

Some Catholics saw Monti's move as a salvo in this ideological campaign, part of a broader project to weaken "mediating institutions," especially the church, vis-à-vis an increasingly powerful secular state.

The fact that the changes were unveiled Feb. 10, the anniversary of the 1929 Lateran Pacts, didn't help. The Lateran Pacts marked the recognition of Vatican sovereignty by the new Italian state, which paid an indemnity for thousands of buildings, property and art expropriated from the church. To some Catholics, the symbolism seemed clear: The tax changes are the first step toward undoing the church/state compact, and they must be resisted.

Yet under the rubric of "only Nixon could go to China," perhaps the thoroughly un-ideological Monti is the lone Italian premier who could pull this off.

So far, signals from both the Vatican and the Italian bishops' conference suggest they're open to compromise. Back in December, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, said, "Sacrifices are part of life."

For his part, Monti has indicated he has no intention of crippling legitimate church institutions. Just this month, he said he wants to introduce incentives to support private schools.

To be sure, a peaceful endgame isn't written in the stars. Recently, prominent Catholic commentator Massimo Introvigne wrote a blistering piece titled "The Festival of Lies," accusing liberal politicians of wanting to shut down church-run homes for unwed mothers, residences for the elderly and drug treatment centers, all in the name of "demagogic anti-clericalism."

Whether Monti can prevent an ideological cross-fire is unclear, especially given his pledge to step down after elections next spring -- assuming his government even makes it that far.

For all those who believe in common ground rather than cultural war, it's worth keeping an eye on what happens. If calm prevails, it could provide momentum for navigating similar church-state conflicts everywhere.

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Football season is upon us, and on cue, the Catholic church in Slovakia seems to be brewing a nice little quarterback controversy centering on the recently deposed Archbishop of Trnava, Róbert Bezák.

I've written on the Bezák case before, but to recap: The 52-year-old Redemptorist was removed as the archbishop of Trnava, the cradle of Slovak Catholicism, on July 2. Officially, there's been no explanation for the move, which followed a Vatican investigation by a Czech bishop. Leaked documents from the papal ambassador suggest that concerns about Bezák included charges that he surrounded himself with gay priests, held suspect views on certain doctrinal questions, disrespected the pope in public and spurned clerical dress.

Supporters of Bezák insist this was all a smokescreen. The real cause of his downfall, they say, was he exposed serious financial irregularities under his predecessor, whose allies used trumped-up charges to exact payback.

In the wake of protests over the ouster, many observers speculated Bezák would be sent abroad. This month, however, the Banská Bystrica diocese announced that Bezák will serve as an associate pastor in a local parish, meaning he'll remain on the national scene.

To date, Pope Benedict XVI has not named a replacement in Trnava. Once he does, the risk would seem to be a division between followers of the new archbishop and those loyal to the deposed prelate. Bezák has done nothing to encourage such a reaction, but that might not prevent it from happening.

Football people know how distracting a split in the fan base can be. Last season, fans of Tim Tebow in Denver put up a billboard demanding that the Broncos play him; in similar fashion, supporters of Bezák have erected billboards in Trnava proclaiming him "always our archbishop."

The Broncos, of course, solved their headache by dispatching Tebow to the Jets, but it looks like Bezák will stay on the Slovakian bench. How that will play out may depend on many factors, including whether Benedict XVI can find an ecclesial equivalent of Peyton Manning to run the offense.

Aside from sporting interest, why does the Slovak drama matter?

First, it raises the question of whether the Vatican owes anyone an explanation when it dumps a bishop. Some people obviously feel it does, including a well-known Czech priest named Fr. Vojt?ch Kodet, who on Aug. 16 accused church leaders of conduct reminiscent of totalitarian regimes in the Bezák case. Kodet, a Carmelite, a leader in the charismatic movement and a onetime exorcist, doesn't seem anyone's idea of a liberal dissident, and presumably he's not the only one thinking these things.

Second, the Bezák case also bears upon Benedict XVI's commitment to financial reform. The pope has taken steps toward greater transparency, especially in the Vatican. Yet if an archbishop really was yanked because he wanted to shine light on possible corruption, it would suggest that not everyone in the system is fully on board.

For those reasons, it may not be a good bet that the press for clarity will just go away.

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A word of congratulations is in order for Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, who celebrated his 70th birthday Wednesday and marks the 40th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood Sunday.

At an age when most people are heading into retirement, Lombardi famously holds at least three jobs. He's the director of the Vatican Press Office, the head of both Vatican Radio and Vatican TV, and a senior adviser in his Jesuit order.

It's become fashionable to poke fun at the Vatican's PR woes, and because Lombardi is the public voice of the institution, he often shoulders the blame. Most insiders, however, believe he's doing his best in a difficult situation. Among friends, Lombardi has said wants his legacy to be a small contribution to a greater spirit of transparency and accountability, especially on the two great crises of Benedict's tenure: the sex abuse scandals and financial reform.

While circumstances sometimes have conspired to limit his ability to move the ball, those intentions are undeniably good.

Perhaps now that American journalist Greg Burke is ensconced as the Vatican's PR guru, Lombardi's instinctive openness will get some reinforcement. If nothing else, his workload ought to be a bit lighter -- and that, by itself, might be a welcome birthday gift.

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Finally, three upcoming events.

First, the fall season of primetime TV talk shows in Italy gears up next week, and it seems the Vatileaks affair will be back in the spotlight. On Monday, journalist Gianluigi Nuzzi is scheduled to appear on Gad Lerner's program "L'Infedele," presumably talking about Nuzzi's blockbuster book *His Holiness: The Secret Papers of Benedict XVI*, and the upcoming trial of Benedict's erstwhile butler, Paolo Gabriele, on charges of being Nuzzi's mole.

Earlier this week, the Vatican denied Italian news reports that there are up to 20 additional suspects in the leaks

scandal. Those reports were apparently based on the fact that in summaries released by the Vatican of the Gabriele investigation, roughly 20 individuals are identified by initials as having been questioned, but a Vatican official insisted those are basically witnesses, not suspects.

In Italy, it's an article of faith that the papal butler could not have orchestrated this affair. Further, Gabriele has acknowledged being the source who spoke in disguise on Nuzzi's own primetime news program last February, purporting to represent a whole group of insiders. Yet his attorney now has said Gabriele acted on his own, and Vatican investigators have said no one else is under review. (The attorney, Carlo Fusco, has since resigned, citing differences in defense strategy with Gabriele.)

Given the contradictions, the central question for Gabriele's trial seemingly isn't "Did the butler do it?" but rather, "Did he do it alone?"

Second, under the heading of "It's good to be pope," Renault is presenting Benedict XVI with a new electric car, and will hold a news conference Thursday at Vatican Radio to tout the gift. It's actually the second electric car Benedict has scored this summer, following a similar donation from Italian automaker NWG in June.

The burst of philanthropy stems from late 2010, when the Vatican launched a book about its embrace of solar energy. At the time, a reporter asked why the pope didn't use an electric car, given his strong environmental sensitivity. A top Vatican official replied that Benedict would love an electric car, but it would have to be donated because it's not in the budget.

That, of course, was a not-too-subtle solicitation for papal freebies. NWG was first across the finish line, giving the pope one of its two-seat electric cars with a top speed of 62 mph and a range of around 86 miles per charge. That vehicle, however, can't handle the armor that is now part of the standard security protocol for papal vehicles.

Renault says the car it's donating this week has been "realized according to the exigencies of the pontiff."

All this, of course, amounts to a classic intersection of profit and prophecy. Benedict has been dubbed the Green Pope and wants to encourage sustainable technologies. Automakers want to sell cars and are happy to use the platform of the papacy to score some free advertising.

It also illustrates one other point. The Vatican always insists that the pope does not endorse commercial products, but what exactly are we supposed to call the red carpet treatment for these gifts if not an endorsement? After all, manufacturers of, say, small arms or condoms presumably couldn't book the Sala Marconi at Vatican Radio to present their wares.

Even in the Vatican, it would seem, you can find wiggle room in apparently hard-and-fast policies if you're so inclined.

Third, Wednesday will bring the first organizational meeting in Washington, D.C., of a new outfit called "The Center on Catholic Social Teaching and Public Engagement," to be located at The Catholic University of America. Its founding director is John Carr, who recently stepped down after more than two decades as a senior policy aide to the U.S. bishops. Both the current and former cardinals of Washington, Donald Wuerl and Theodore McCarrick, are scheduled to be on hand.

Although the immediate context is the 2012 elections, the center's ambitions are more long-term. In effect, the hope is to put Humpty Dumpty back together again -- uniting the pro-life and peace-and-justice wings of the church, reflecting the full range of Catholic social teaching.

According to a memo by Carr, the institute's spirit is both/and. The aim, he writes, is to be "an effective voice for consistent Catholic commitment to both human life and human dignity, economic justice and religious freedom, civil dialogue and clear moral principles."

To what extent the new center will succeed remains to be seen. However, for all those Catholics who lament the divisions in the church and wonder why somebody isn't doing something about it -- well, it looks like somebody is.

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