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Vatican and LCWR, a fired archbishop and getting Boko Haram right

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 2, 2012 All Things Catholic

An old Roman quip holds that the only things moving during August are *cani e americani*, meaning dogs and Americans. It expresses the city's somnambulant ethos during the traditional *ferragosto* hiatus as natives head for the hills or the beaches.

At the moment, Benedict XVI is at the summer papal retreat in Castel Gandolfo, where he's just put the finishing touches on the third volume of his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, this one devoted to the infancy narratives, set for publication in multiple languages in the fall.

Likewise, the Vatican's No. 2 official, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, is on vacation in northern Italy, taking time to say a Mass for locals Wednesday and to chat briefly with reporters, dropping a hint that Benedict XVI might write an encyclical on faith for the "Year of Faith" that opens this autumn.

The summer lull affords a chance to catch up on recent stories that haven't gotten quite the attention they deserve. They include a break-out interview with the Vatican's new doctrinal czar, the curious case of a fired Slovakian archbishop and a counterintuitive view on the militant Islamic Boko Haram movement in Nigeria from one of Africa's brightest Catholic stars.

Here's a teaser: One of these stories raises the provocative question of whether sweatpants on a bishop are a sign of trouble.

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Little of consequence moves in the Vatican without the say-so of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which means a regime change there is always full of portent. That's especially so for Americans at the moment, given that the doctrinal congregation is the architect of a Vatican-mandated overhaul of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

The new prefect of the doctrinal congregation, German Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller, is thus automatically a VIP.

In late July, the 64-year-old Müller gave an extended interview to *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper. Müller knew whatever he said would set a tone, making this the first indication since his July 2 appointment of what kind of leader he wants to be.

Highlights include:

- A clear call to fidelity for women religious, but also a desire to stress "mutual trust" rather than "working against one another."
- A desire to stress the positive role of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in presenting Catholic

teaching as a "force for hope."
- A passion for social justice, including embrace of a "correct" form of liberation theology, meaning one that avoids confusion with Marxism.
- A signal that Müller intends to be a hands-on prefect, rather than sitting around waiting for the pope to tell him what to do.

During the interview, Müller was asked about the doctrinal congregation's discussions with both the Lefebvrites, meaning the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, and "the American sisters," a reference to LCWR.

In response, Müller signaled a fairly tough line on principle for both groups: "There are no negotiations about the Word of God, and one can't simultaneously believe and not believe," he said. "One can't pronounce the three religious vows and then not take them seriously, just as one can't make reference to the tradition of the church and then accept it only in some parts."

Unbidden, Müller brought up the question of women's ordination, perhaps suggesting he regards this as central to the dispute with LCWR.

"Priestly ministry can't be considered a sort of position of earthly power, thinking there will be emancipation only when everyone can occupy it," he said, calling for an end to "polemics and ideology" and for "immersion in the doctrine of the church."

Müller then hinted he would like to turn a corner in relations with the American sisters.

"Precisely in America, women and men religious have accomplished extraordinary things for the church, for the education and formation of youth," he said. "Christ needs youth who follow this path and who identify themselves with its fundamental choice. The Second Vatican Council affirmed marvelous things for the renewal of religious life, as for the common vocation to holiness."

"It's important to reinforce mutual trust," Müller said, "rather than working against one another."

More broadly, Müller said he'd like to stress the positive role of the doctrinal congregation.

"Here I see one of the great duties of the congregation and of the church in general: We have to rediscover the faith and make it resplendent again as a positive force, as a force of hope and a resource for overcoming conflicts and tensions," he said.

Regarding liberation theology, Müller was asked about his experience of Latin America. He's a close friend of Peruvian Fr. Gustavo Guttierez, one of the fathers of liberation theology, and he's spent two to three months living among the poor in Peru every year since 1988.

Here's what he said:

> "Certainly a doctrinal confusion between Marxist auto-redemption and the salvation given by God has to be rejected. On the other hand, we have to sincerely ask ourselves: How can we talk about the love and mercy of God facing the suffering of so many people who don't have food, water and health care, who don't know how to offer a future to their own children, where human dignity is missing and where human rights are ignored by the powerful? ... If we consider ourselves as the family of God, then we can contribute to changing and improving these situations unworthy of the human person."

Müller hails from Mainz in Germany, and he recalled with pride that Bishop Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler of Mainz was among the pioneers of Catholic social teaching in the 19th century.

"A Catholic kid from Mainz has social passion in the blood, and I'm proud of it," he said.

Finally, Müller signaled he intends to take running the doctrinal congregation into his own hands, rather than deferring everything to his boss, Pope Benedict XVI.

"I believe the reason for my coming to Rome certainly isn't to weigh him down with the various questions," he said. "My duty is to relieve him of part of the work and not to present him with problems that can be resolved at our level. The Holy Father has the important mission to announce the Gospel and to confirm the brothers and sisters in the faith. It's our job to deal with all the related questions which are less pleasant, so that he's not weighed down by too many things, though naturally keeping him informed of the essential facts."

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On the very day Müller got a new job, Archbishop Róbert Bezák of Trnava, Slovakia, lost his old one. He was removed from office by the Vatican on July 2, and since that's a fairly rare occurrence, curiosity continues to swirl around what happened in the case of the 52-year-old Redemptorist, appointed to lead the Slovakian church in April 2009.

Prior to his downfall, Bezák had been seen as a figure to watch in the European hierarchy -- one of the continent's youngest major prelates, someone who appealed to the center-left camp in both the church and in European politics. As is customary, the Vatican has declined to provide any official explanation for dumping him, and, as is equally customary, that information vacuum has generated speculation and conspiracy theories.

Three developments have occurred since I last updated this story in mid-July.

First, the Slovakian bishops met July 17 and didn't line up in defense of their fallen colleague. A statement said: "The Holy Father made this decision after being personally and thoroughly acquainted with the results of a visitation and communication between Bezák and the relevant [Vatican] congregations. The bishops ... accept the Holy See's decision."

(There are 4 million Catholics in Slovakia, representing 70 percent of the national population, led by a total of 28 bishops. A staunch Catholic ethos has long been a pillar of national identity, especially vis-à-vis their more religiously rebellious neighbors to the north in the Czech Republic.)

Second, a Slovakian television network claimed to obtain leaked copies of letters among Bezák, the Vatican and the Slovak bishops, outlining various concerns about Bezák's leadership. According to the report, there were 11 such concerns, including:

- Bezák's choice of aides, charging they included priests who are known homosexuals or who have illegitimate children.
- Bezák's willingness to accept candidates for the priesthood who had been rejected in other dioceses, either for their doctrinal views or for suspect personal morality.
- Questions about financial management, including Bezák's reliance on Slovakian laity linked to political and financial scandals.
- Questions about Bezák's views on issues such as priestly celibacy, Marian devotion, the ordination of women, abortion, euthanasia and extramarital sex.
- Bezák's allegedly irreverent manner of referring to the pope simply as "Mr. Pope" in public (in Slovakia, it's apparently common parlance to add "Mr." before formal titles), and of allegedly referring to other Slovakian bishops as "old men and fools" while styling himself as "modern" and "enlightened."
- Complaints that Bezák spurns formal church attire, referring to it as better suited for sorcerers, preferring

casual secular dress. (The Fleet Street boys in London predictably fastened on this point, with the *Daily Telegraph* asserting that Bezák fell victim to a "papal crusade against sweatpants.")

According to the TV network's report, Bezák wrote back, rejecting these charges. Among other things, Bezák reportedly claimed he had confirmed many of the aides who served his predecessor, Archbishop Jan Sokol, and none of them had been flagged as having suspect reputations.

The leaked correspondence also suggests that Bezák expressed doubt Benedict XVI was actually involved in the decision to fire him, saying the pope's signature wasn't on any of the documents, and said if the insistence on secrecy is intended for his protection, he's willing to waive it.

Neither the Vatican nor the Slovakian bishops' conference has confirmed the authenticity of the documents obtained by the network, but no one has denied it, either, and most observers seem to regard them as genuine.

Third, another Slovakian media outlet reported in late July that the country's General Prosecutor is looking into charges of financial mismanagement under Sokol, who was in charge of the Trnava archdiocese, considered the cradle of Slovak Catholicism, from 1989 to 2009. According to the report, when Bezák took over three years ago, he found a number of bank accounts never registered in the archdiocese's books to which church funds had been transferred, and he informed civil authorities of the discrepancies.

According to that report, Sokol has denied any wrongdoing vigorously. The General Prosecutor is apparently considering what, if anything, to do next.

Based on conversations this week with sources in both Rome and Slovakia, here's where things seem to stand.

Friends of Bezák insist the Vatican has been hoodwinked. They say Bezák is a reformer who tried to promote transparency, supposedly the new watchword under Benedict XVI, and who was brought down by forces loyal to his far more conservative predecessor, using trumped-up charges of heterodoxy and moral laxity as a pretext. These pro-Bezák voices say his defenestration has left rank-and-file Catholics angry and demoralized.

Critics of Bezák say the mistake was appointing him in the first place, and in the current context of Central Europe, allowing him to continue would have courted disaster. The prevalently conservative ethos of Slovakian Catholicism acts as a firebreak, they argue, against the regional spread of movements such as a priests' revolt in Austria, but with Bezák in charge the floodgates might have opened. Moreover, they argue, there was a real risk of defections to the Lefebvrite camp if more traditional Slovak Catholics felt they couldn't count on the official leadership of the church to hold the line.

As I've written before, it's hard to assess the rights and wrongs at a distance. What can be said with greater certainty is that in the absence of a convincing official explanation, the guessing game about what caused Bezák's demise seems destined to continue.

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Anyone who's moved around in Catholic circles knows the kind of things visitors tend to be curious about: who the movers and shakers in the local church are, who's just taking up space or keeping seats warm, and so on.

Whenever I've visited Nigeria over the years, one name above all registered on the mover-and-shaker meter: Matthew Kukah, a priest and intellectual who holds a master's in public policy from the Kennedy School at Harvard and a doctorate from the University of London. Kukah's writings on civil society, democracy and Christian/Muslim relations are required reading across Africa. He's played a leading role on national commissions devoted to electoral reform and human rights violations, and chaired a federal commission devoted

to reconciliation between Shell Oil and the indigenous Ogoni people in the Niger Delta. Just last week, Kukah joined the Nigerian senate on a retreat to ponder constitutional reform.

Kukah's résumé is so distinguished that, in years past, when I would ask Nigerian friends why he hadn't been elevated to the episcopacy, their wry answer often was: "He's too smart to be a bishop!"

As it turns out, they didn't have enough confidence in the system. Benedict XVI named Kukah as the bishop of Sokoto in northwestern Nigeria last June, which, among other things, makes him a point man for relations with Islam. The city is home to the "Sokoto Caliphate," and its sultan is considered the spiritual leader of Nigeria's roughly 85 million Muslims, accounting for half of the national population.

All this is by way of saying that when Kukah speaks on Nigeria's current wave of violence fueled by the radical Islamist Boko Haram movement, it's worth paying attention. Kukah's credentials don't automatically make him right, but they do guarantee he'll be taken seriously.

Founded in 2001, Boko Haram is allegedly responsible for about 10,000 deaths in the last decade, including an estimated 620 in the first six months of 2012. It's made a specialty of attacking Christian targets, including churches during Sunday services.

This week, Kukah gave an interview to Oasis, a project devoted to Christian/Muslim relations founded by Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan. Kukah's views fly in the face of two bits of conventional wisdom: first, that what's happening in Nigeria is primarily about tensions between Muslims and Christians; and second, that what's needed is a robust military crackdown on the terrorist groups.

Kukah makes three key points:

- There is no religious violence in Nigeria, but rather chaos bred by political corruption and mismanagement of the country's resources, especially oil.
- Despite spectacular assaults on churches that generate headlines, the bulk of Boko Haram's victims are actually fellow Muslims.
- Reliance on armed force to beat back Boko Haram risks turning the Nigerian military into "an army of occupation," as well as creating a "meal ticket" for security agencies that benefit from the chaos. Kukah said this year, Nigeria plans to spend more than $6 billion on security, roughly the same as the entire national budget two years ago.

Here's the heart of Kukah's argument.

"The problems of Nigeria, the terrible violence above all, has nothing to do with religion," he said. "The problems here arise from the mismanagement of the country's resources and from the inability of the government to control the situation. Every crisis in Nigeria is immediately linked to religions, but we have never had any crisis at all arising from either Christians or Muslims fighting over religious issues. The real reason behind the current crisis is political and economic."

According to Kukah, the bloodshed fomented by Boko Haram is simply an extension of the violence in the last 20-plus years in Nigeria's Delta region and in the southwest, all of which he traces to corruption and a lack of confidence in public administration of the country's wealth.

"You could stop this situation today and tomorrow it will appear in a different place," he said.

Kukah underscored that Christians aren't the only victims.

"The fact that they attack churches with extraordinary violence makes the media come to the conclusion that they are against Christians, but this is not true," he said. "They kill Christians, but they also kill Muslim women and children. They are criminals who attack churches, media houses, police stations, markets ... They have attacked Muslims leaders and institutions, and they have killed thousands of Muslims, indeed, a far greater number than the Christians."

Kukah concedes that Boko Haram invokes militant Islamic rhetoric, but insists that "the mere use of this language does not make their criminality religious in any sense."

In terms of an exit strategy, Kukah argues that civil society rather than the military is the key.

"The federal government should set a target for the withdrawal of the military from our streets," he said. "The political class must be encouraged to find a solution to what is clearly a political problem and not a religious one. Community leaders, not necessarily religious leaders, must be encouraged to take charge by embarking on initiatives that aim at bringing communities together."

Of course, it might be tough for many Nigerian Christians sorting through the rubble of their churches, destroyed by Muslim militants expressly vowing to wage holy war, to swallow that this isn't at some level a religious conflict. Still, Kukah's analysis is a reminder that situations are usually more complicated than they seem at a distance, and it's always worth taking seriously the perspectives of those who actually live in these neighborhoods.

Finally, Kukah said his diocese of Sokoto has so far been spared any violence.

"I have encouraged our people to remain alert, but we have decided not to change our lifestyle, that is, changing times for mass and prayers, due to fear," he said. "I have told my people that fear is not in the vocabulary of any true Christian."

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