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In praise of Italy; a painful anniversary in India

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 30, 2013 All Things Catholic

So far this year, beating up on Italy has become something of a fashion statement. Election of a Latin American outsider to the papacy has been hailed as a long-overdue break with the Vatican's Italian old guard, while right now political commentators around the world are aghast that former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi still has a following despite his conviction for tax fraud.

This week, however, I come to praise Italy, not to bury it.

That's swimming against the tide because the Berlusconi mess in particular is generating a whole mini-genre of "What's the matter with Italy?" essays. For an example, see Tim Parks in *The New York Review of Books* [1], where he claims that "the polarities good/evil, moral/immoral, or even effective/ineffective" are absent in the politics of *il bel paese*.

Leave aside whether a similar indictment couldn't be leveled against, say, British or American political life. The point is that many aspects of Italian culture, which once struck outside observers as charming, all of a sudden seem malevolent.

In church terms, this anti-Italian humor marks a strong break with the past, when it was more or less assumed that Italians carry a special gene for ecclesiastical governance.

There are clear signs of a de-Italianization campaign under the new regime. To date, Pope Francis has set up three bodies to flesh out his reform: a group of cardinals to assist in governance, a committee to investigate the Vatican bank, and a pontifical commission to study the Vatican's economic and administrative structures. All told, they include 21 people, with just three Italians among them. (On the other hand, today's hot rumor is that Francis is set to name an Italian as his Secretary of State, 58-year-old Archbishop Pietro Parolin. More on that as it develops.)

Whenever an old consensus begins to crumble, there's always a danger of throwing out the baby with the bath water. In that spirit, I'll sketch here three bits of Italianness that Francis and his team might do well to preserve.

Before beginning, several caveats:

- Describing something as a typical Italian quality does not mean every Italian shares it. In the Vatican, one sometimes finds the paradox that many Italians don't seem stereotypically Italian while some non-Italians have assimilated the least appealing elements of Italian culture.
- Italy is evolving rapidly along with the rest of the world, and many younger Italians might say the qualities described below belong more to an earlier age.
- Although the Vatican is influenced by Italian mores, it's also shaped at least as much by ecclesial tradition and by the backgrounds of people from all over the world.
- I'm not a neutral observer, since I basically consider myself Italian by adoption. I butcher the language but I love speaking it; many of my closest colleagues and friends are Italian; and if I go too long without a plate of *bucatini all'amatriciana*, I suffer withdrawal. Take the following, therefore, with a grain of salt.

Patience

Moaning about Italy's torpor is the favorite indoor sport among ex-pats, and there's merit to those gripes. Based on six years of living there, I can report that Italy is the kind of place where you can call a plumber in November and he'll say, "I'll get back to you after the holidays," by which he means February.

On the other hand, Italians have a strong sense of history and are perhaps more sensitive than others, especially Americans, to the risks of leaping before one looks. Their legendary attachment to *pazienza*, patience, can be a thin veil for sloth, but sometimes, there's wisdom as well.

To take a Vatican example: When the abuse crisis exploded in the United States in 2002, there was pressure for Rome to immediately sign off on norms that would have given bishops essentially unlimited authority to remove accused priests from ministry. The Vatican slowed things down, eventually approving a system with the possibility of judicial appeal.

The adequacy of those policies is still contested, but many canon lawyers believe the Vatican's caution was helpful in providing at least a nod to due process. (It should also be noted that by their standards, the Vatican moved quickly; the bishops adopted their policies in June 2002, a mixed Vatican/U.S. commission revised them in October, and approval came Dec. 8.)

One could make a similar point about the present ferment over the Institute for the Works of Religion, the so-called "Vatican bank."

In a way, the easiest thing for Pope Francis would be to shut the place down today. He would be widely praised on editorial pages, he would insulate himself from the possibility of future scandal, and secular bankers would be thrilled at the prospect of divvying up almost $9 billion in new assets.

Yet if the Vatican bank didn't exist, popes probably would have to invent it. Religious orders and Catholic organizations that work in differing parts of the world need a place to keep their assets safe and a way to move money around securely, and they likely would clamor for the Vatican to provide it.

In that light, the responsible thing for Francis arguably is to take his time, to allow the commission he's set up to do its work, and then to make adjustments to clean the place up without sacrificing its essential mission. PR-driven, American-style rapid response might not serve the pope, or the church, terribly well.

Personal relationships

Italians generally prioritize relationships over efficiency. Anyone who's ever drummed their fingers in a restaurant while a waiter chats endlessly with someone at another table or watched as the start of a meeting is delayed for a half-hour or more as people mill about and catch up with one another understands the dynamic.

For sure, this emphasis on personal ties can shade off into what objectively would be perceived as corruption.

For instance, in 2010 prosecutors opened an investigation into Cardinal Crescenzio Sepe, now in Naples, related to his tenure from 2001 to 2006 as prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, better known as Propaganda Fidei. Allegedly, Sepe gave public officials sweetheart deals on apartments owned by Propaganda Fidei in Rome at the same time that roughly $3 million in public funds was being funneled into remodeling projects on congregation properties, including its famed headquarters in Rome's Piazza di Spagna.

Even if those charges are entirely accurate, it's still possible Sepe didn't perceive what he was doing as a kickback. He may have seen it simply as a matter of taking care of his friends, which is what a stand-up guy of

his generation is expected to do.

Such potential abuse obviously needs to be policed, but there are also advantages to the emphasis on relationships.

My experience of the Vatican is that it can be a difficult place to penetrate, but once people know you, they feel obligated to you in a way that's strikingly different from bureaucracies elsewhere. After a relationship has been established, the tug of graciousness often compels officials to go out of their way to meet someone halfway or to help them navigate difficult situations.

That's not universally true, and it doesn't always lead to a happy outcome, but it's nevertheless real.

Beneath this cultural trait is an intuition that friendship matters and that knowing someone ought to affect how you treat them. That instinct, one might argue, is something to preserve -- even if, to use a term from Benedict XVI, it must be "purified" -- rather than abandoning it in the name of efficiency *über alles*.

Law and pastoral practice

Anglo-Saxons believe laws ought to describe what people actually do. If we adopt a 55 mph speed limit, for instance, we expect people to comply; if they don't, the appropriate response is either to launch a crackdown or to change the law, but either way, a situation in which people aren't following the rules strikes us as intolerable.

That's not the classic Italian understanding. For them, law is more akin to a descriptor of a perfect state of affairs, and everyone realizes most people will fall short to varying degrees. There's an old Italian saying that captures the point: *Le legge vengono scritte come se gli uomini fossero angeli*, which means, "Laws are written as if men were angels."

If you want proof of the point, stand on any Italian sidewalk sometime and watch how they approach traffic laws.

There's certainly a shadow side to this trait. Italians are endlessly creative in finding reasons why the law shouldn't apply to them. My wife and I, for instance, paid our rent in cash for eight years because our landlady in Rome insisted the tax code is for the *pezzi grossi*, "big shots," not for her. (In his essay on Berlusconi, Parks makes the valid point that one reason Italians may be ambivalent about his downfall is because they don't want to be held accountable for their own "small misdemeanors and tax evasions.")

Yet here, too, there's an upside.

As applied to the Vatican, this understanding of law means that officials typically make a strong distinction between rules and application. Law is the realm of universal and timeless norms, while pastoral practice is where accommodations are made on the fly to reflect real-world situations.

I once attended a book presentation featuring a senior Vatican cardinal, who was asked during a Q-and-A about Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics. His answer was classic. As a Vatican official, he said, the law of the church is clear; as a pastor, however, I can't presume to judge your situation, and you have to make the choice in conscience that you believe best corresponds to the truth of your situation.

One could perhaps argue that more of that compassion ought to be built into the law itself, and it may be that on the issue of divorced and remarried Catholics, Francis is moving in that direction. His comments aboard the papal plane from Rio de Janeiro to Rome on July 28 seemed to drop a hint in that regard.

On the other hand, the Vatican has to draft laws that apply across time and space, in every corner of the world

and in every cultural situation. No decree, however nuanced, will ever adequately reflect all that complexity. Given that, maintaining some degree of Italian subjectivity is arguably the church's best bet.

I could go on cataloguing aspects of Italian culture that arguably have left a positive imprint. For instance, in 2003, the Vatican's Italian-dominated diplomatic corps took a typically nuanced position vis-à-vis the Hussein regime in Iraq, criticizing what some described on background as the "Calvinist dualism" of the Bush administration. Especially in light of the suffering of the Christian community in post-war Iraq, the stance now seems prophetic.

The bottom line, however, is the challenge for the Franciscan reform with regard to the Vatican's Italian ethos is probably refinement, not rejection.

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August marks one of the most painful anniversaries in recent Christian life.

Five years ago this month, the most vicious anti-Christian pogrom of the early 21st century broke out in the eastern Indian state of Orissa. The official count of the dead stands at somewhere between 75 and 100, though some observers believe the total may be as much as five times higher. Many were hacked to death by machete-wielding Hindu radicals, with thousands more injured and at least 50,000 left homeless.

Tens of thousands of Christians fled to displacement camps, where some languished for two years or more. An estimated 5,000 Christian homes, along with 350 churches and schools, were destroyed. A Catholic nun, Sr. Meena Barwa, was raped, then marched naked and beaten. Police discouraged her from filing a report and declined to arrest her attackers.

The rampage was led by Hindu radicals incensed by the assassination of Hindu leader Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati on Aug. 24, 2008. Although independent observers believe he was killed by Maoist insurgents, radicals blamed it on Christians. Most were members of the Dalit underclass, making them easy targets.

It was not an isolated incident. Last year, according to the Global Council of Indian Christians, there were 170 assaults on Christians in the country, an average of one every other day. The violence in Orissa, however, was unprecedented in terms of its scope and scale.

Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai recently gave an interview to Vatican Radio on the five-year anniversary, calling the victims of the Orissa pogrom "true martyrs of the faith."

Their persecutors, Gracias said, "wanted them to deny Christ, to say that they didn't believe in Christ, but they replied that this wasn't possible, because for them, Christ was everything. That's why they were killed and suffered such violence."

Archbishop John Barwa of Cuttack-Bhubaneshwar, an archdiocese located in Orissa, recently said his church is flourishing despite the damage done five years ago, and today, it's generating new priests being sent as missionaries to other parts of the country and the world.

So far, Pope Francis hasn't really engaged the issue of anti-Christian persecution in a systematic way. Is there something he could say or do that might be of help to at-risk believers in places such as Orissa?

Here's one possibility. During his press conference on the way home from Rio de Janeiro, Francis said, "I must go to Asia," because Benedict XVI never visited the continent during his eight-year reign and because Asia is "important." Francis mentioned he has standing invitations to visit Sri Lanka and the Philippines, but said "this

is all up in the air."

When he gets around to hammering out an Asian itinerary, one dramatic option would be to include a stop in India -- perhaps even in Orissa itself -- at which time he could formally declare the victims of the 2008 massacres martyrs, opening the way for their beatification without the necessity of a miracle.

That step has already been requested by survivors of the 2008 pogrom and relatives of those who died, and church officials in India have endorsed the idea.

If Francis were to take that step in person rather than simply signing a decree in Rome, it could have enormous impact on raising consciousness -- not just about the Indian martyrs, but the broader threats faced by Christians in a growing number of global neighborhoods.

It is, at least, something to ponder.

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