

Hovering Over St. Peter's, the Ghost of Vatileaks

Judith Harris (March 08, 2013)



Once again the Eternal City is the anxious setting for election of a new Pope, the 266th in history. On Thursday the last cardinal who can vote in the approaching Conclave arrived for what is, for the Roman Catholic Church, an epocal event - epocal but also traumatic because the resignation of Benedict XIV was completely unexpected. Hovering like a ghost over the proceedings, say Vaticanologists, is the scandal of Vatileaks, with its revelations of infighting and financial scandal within the Vatican.

ROME -



On a rainy Wednesday evening cardinals from around the world awaiting the convening of the Conclave to elect a successor to Benedict XVI gathered inside St. Peter's Basilica for a prayer service. Behind tightly guarded barriers they were joined by hundreds of soaked pilgrims, many of them foreign visitors with children in tow, who braved the chilly weather to participate on the eve of what is, for the Roman Catholic Church, an epocal event - epocal but also traumatic because the resignation of Benedict XIV was completely unexpected. Some of the faithful knelt in prayer on the hard marble floor; others raised their cameras overhead to capture the sight of the cardinals' red caps near the distant altar.

Hovering in the background of this solemn pre-Conclave ritual was the ghost of what has been called Vatileaks. The term refers to revelations over Curia infighting and compromising financial dealings involving the Vatican bank, the Istituto per le Opere Religiose. In early 2012 a vast trove of documents was clandestinely removed from the privacy of the papal inner circle and published in a best-selling book by Italian journalist Gianluigi Nuzzi. Taking the flak for leaking the documents to Nuzzi was Paolo Gabriele, who spent months inside a Vatican prison. Gabriele, usually described as the pontiff's butler, was a sort of papal household factotum who enjoyed access to both the documents and an uncontrolled photocopy machine, and was also able to eavesdrop as he served and cleared plates from the papal dinner table. Gabriele, who maintained he was acting in the interests of the Pontiff, was found guilty of theft by a Vatican court on Oct 6, 2012, and sentenced to 18 months in an Italian prison. Before Christmas, however, he was visited by the Pope, pardoned, released and given a clerical job.

Although it has long been suspected that Gabriele did not act entirely alone, no proof has been offered until now. But today's *La Repubblica* carries a full-page interview with an unnamed individual who claims that he (or she) was a party to the leaking of documents in the name of Vatican transparency in an effort to promote transparency and the sort of reform that would bring the Church closer into the modern world. According to this individual, their group was composed altogether of 20 men and women, some of whom were very close to the Pope himself. In addition, "Other documents exist," the interviewer, Marco Ansaldo, was told. If so, their contents will almost certainly see the light.

Shortly before the pardon, Benedict XVI had read a report on the scandal which he had requested to be prepared by a commission of three octogenarian cardinals, Julian Herranz, Salvatore De Giorgi and Jozef Tomko. To date, as Italian Vaticanist Marco Politi, author of *Joseph Ratzinger: Crisis of a Papacy* (Laterza, 2013) confirmed today during a briefing at the Foreign Press Association in Rome, no sense of the contents of that report is known. However, it is understood that their investigation results can, and surely will, be discussed with the cardinal electors of the papal Conclave that is about to open. What is also clear is that the non- Italian cardinals are particularly distressed over the scandal.

The Pontiff had for many years believed that, if one is incapable of carrying out one's duties, it is best to retire and - in the Pontiff's own words - even had "a duty to do so." The Pope, said Politi, "did not want to see others governing in his name." At the same time, by compromising the reputation and prestige of the Vatican bank, "Vatileaks accelerated the first programmed resignation in history," according to Politi. "The resignation poses the question of the human limits of a pontificate for the first time. It humanizes the Church and shows its fragility."

What next? No date has yet been named for the beginning of the Conclave, perhaps because the cardinals are taking their time to consider carefully the next step. Nor has an obvious successor come to the fore, as has happened when previous Popes have had lingering illnesses. For the Church, the road ahead remains so far entirely unknown.



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