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SUBJECT: THE HOLY SEE: A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

REF: VATICAN 25 AND PREVIOUS (NOTAL)

CLASSIFIED BY: Julieta Valls Noyes, CDA, EXEC, State. REASON: 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) Summary: Together with other flaps, the recent global controversy over the lifted excommunication of a Holocaust denying bishop (reftel) exposed a major disconnect between Pope Benedict XVI's stated intentions and the way in which his message is received by the wider world. There are many causes for this communication gap: the challenge of governing a hierarchical yet decentralized organization, leadership weaknesses at the top, and an undervaluing of (and ignorance about) 21st century communications. These factors have led to muddled, reactive messaging that reduces the volume of the moral megaphone the Vatican uses to advance its objectives. This is especially true with audiences whose view of the Vatican is informed largely by mass media coverage. There are signs that at least some in the Vatican have learned their lessons and will work to reshape the Holy See's communications structure. Whether they'll prevail remains to be seen. End Summary.

A CENTRALIZED HIERARCHY MAKING DECENTRALIZED DECISIONS

¶2. (SBU) The Vatican is highly hierarchical with the Pope ultimately responsible for all important matters. Yet it is also highly decentralized in its decision-making. This structure reflects belief in the principle of "subsidiarity": leaving decisions to those closest to, and best informed on, a particular matter. On a practical level, however, subsidiarity can limit horizontal communication by eliminating peer consultation and review. This approach also encourages a narrow focus on issues at the expense of the big picture.

¶3. (C) In discussing the recent crisis with CDA and PAO, Archbishop Claudio Celli, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, described the Church's current communication style as being focused on the content of a decision, rather than its public impact. XXXXXXXXXXXX noted that this phenomenon is compounded by the fact that officials from the various Church organs see themselves as advocates for their issues, without considering their impact on the Church as a whole. The result is a process in which only a handful of experts are aware of imminent decisions -- even major decisions with broad implications -- and those who are become proponents, rather than impartial advisors to the Pope.

¶4. (C) A series of missteps during Benedict's Papacy have made the lack of information-sharing in the Church painfully clear. In 2006, the Pope made a speech in Regensburg that was widely decried as insulting to Muslims, though he later explained he had no such intent. In 2008, the Pope himself baptized (i.e., converted) a prominent Muslim during the 2008 Easter Vigil service at St. Peters, an event broadcast worldwide; the Cardinal who runs Inter-Faith Dialogues for the Church knew nothing about the conversion until it happened. This year, Father Federico Lombardi, head of the Vatican press office, and Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, which includes relations with Jews, learned only after the fact about the decision to reinstate communion with schismatic Lefebvrist bishops who included a Holocaust denier (reftel). In the midst of that scandal, meanwhile, the Pope proposed promoting to auxiliary bishop a priest who said Hurricane Katrina was "divine retribution" for licentiousness in New Orleans. The resulting outcry led the cleric to decline the offer.

A TIN EAR AT THE TOP

¶5. (C) These public missteps have intensified scrutiny of the small group of decision-makers advising the Pope. Normally reserved Vatican commentators have directed withering criticism their way. XXXXXXXXXXXX, recently wrote that "curial chaos, confusion, and incompetence" had made clear "how dysfunctional the curia remains in terms of both crisis analysis and crisis management." Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone -- who is tasked with managing the Curia and is its highest ranking official after the Pope -- has been a particular target. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Cardinal Bertone had "distinguished himself by his absence" during the Lefebvrist controversy, and that the curia had become "more disorganized than before" under his leadership. Yet XXXXXXXXXXXX may have understated the problem. At the height of the Lefebvrist scandal, Bertone referred publicly to the offending bishop by the wrong name, then denounced the media for "inventing" a problem where there was none. Other critics note Bertone's lack of diplomatic experience (he speaks only Italian, for example), and a personal style that elevates "pastoral" work -- with frequent foreign travel focusing on the spiritual needs of Catholics around the world -- over foreign policy and management.

¶6. (C) More broadly, critics point to a lack of generational or geographical diversity in the Pope's inner circle. Most of the top ranks of the Vatican -- all men, generally in their seventies -- do not understand modern media and new information technologies. The blackberry-using Father Lombardi remains an anomaly in a culture in which many officials do not even have official email accounts. XXXXXXXXXXXX laid even greater emphasis on the Italo-centric nature of the Pope's closest advisors. Other than Archbishop James Harvey, an American and head of the Papal household, there is no one from an Anglophone country in the Pope's inner circle. XXXXXXXXXXXX said this meant few had exposure to the American -- or, indeed, global -- rough and tumble of media communications. The Pope's Italian advisors, XXXXXXXXXXXX, tend towards old-fashioned, inwardly focused communications written in "coded" language that no-one outside their tight circles can decipher. (The Israeli Ambassador, for example, told CDA that he recently received a Vatican statement that was supposed to contain a positive

message for Israel, but it was so veiled he missed it, even when told it was there.)

¶7. (C) There is also the question of who, if anyone, brings dissenting views to the Pope's attention. As noted, Cardinal Bertone is considered a "yes man," and other Cardinals don't hold much sway with the Pope -- or lack the confidence to bring him bad news. And if bad news rarely filters out, leaks never spring. XXXXXXXXXXXX said that under Pope John Paul II leaks were much more common. While damaging, these leaks did allow time for critics of pending decisions to mobilize and present opposing views to the Pope in time. Pope Benedict and Cardinal Bertone run a much tighter ship, XXXXXXXXXXXX, but at the expense of squashing coordination or allow dissenting voices to be heard.

NOT SPIN CITY

¶8. (C) As has become evident throughout the controversies, much of the Vatican hierarchy greatly undervalues external communication. Structurally, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications and the Vatican Press Office are weak. The former applies the Church's teachings to the field of communications and is not involved in shaping the Pope's message. The latter has the writ, but not the influence.

¶9. (C) Father Lombardi, the spokesman, is not part of the Pope's inner circle. He has little influence over major decisions, even when he knows about them beforehand. And the poor man is terribly overworked: Lombardi is simultaneously the head of the Vatican Press Office, Vatican Radio (which broadcasts in 45 languages), and the Vatican Television Center, literally moving from one office to the other over the course of the day. It's a grueling schedule on good days, and debilitating during crises. Father Lombardi is the deliverer, rather than a shaper, of the message. In the wake of the Lefebrevist controversy, he openly said that the Vatican press office "didn't control the communication." Without a comprehensive communication strategy in which he plays a central role, he is dependent on individual Church organs and leaders seeking his advice. It's a hit or miss proposition.

¶10. (C) There is another cost to divorcing decision-making from public spin: the Church's message is often unclear. XXXXXXXXXXXX candidly said that the Holy See rarely considered how best to explain dogmatic, ecclesiastical, moral or other decisions to a broader public. He emphasized that the content of the message should not/not be different -- the Catholic Church would often take positions contrary to public opinion -- but the Church hierarchy needed to think more about how to present positions.

CRACKING THE REAL DA VINCI CODE?

¶11. (C) The communication culture of the broader Catholic Church is diverse, however, with many Church-affiliated organizations now excelling at communication. One example of a Church organization that is using modern communications strategies to deliver its message, interestingly enough, is Opus Dei. (Pope John Paul II was widely perceived as being more adept at public communications than Benedict; his communications director, Joaquin Navarro Valls, famously belongs to Opus Dei.) CDA and PolOff recently met with XXXXXXXXXXXX and discussed how Opus Dei responded to the "Da Vinci Code" - a novel which pilloried the group. Sanchez said that Opus Dei realized it could respond in one of three ways: (1) ignore the controversy; (2) adopt a 'no prisoners' approach and refute every error; or (3) treat the controversy as a chance to explain Opus Dei to the world. Opus Dei chose the third option, holding regular briefings for journalists and others, and the organization's membership has actually increased as a result.

FIXING WHAT'S LOST IN TRANSLATION

¶12. (C) There is a growing urgency within the Vatican about the need to change the current communication culture. The rare public criticisms offered by Father Lombardi and Cardinal Kasper of their colleagues' roles in the Lefebrevist scandal are an extremely strong indicator of internal disquiet. There are a number of proposals circulating to help fix the problem. XXXXXXXXXXXXX have confirmed privately to the Embassy that discussions are underway about having the Pontifical Council for Social Communications assume a greater coordinating role on major decisions. Father Lombardi has privately proposed to his leadership the possibility of creating an office in the Secretariat of State to flag potentially controversial decisions and has asked for resources to prepare translations of major statements more quickly. Other Vatican insiders close to the Pope have suggested bringing more native English speakers into positions in the Pope's inner circle. And not a few voices are calling for Cardinal Bertone's removal from his current position.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Behind closed doors, our Vatican contacts seems to be talking about nothing but the need for better internal coordination on decisions and planned public messages. Most Church leaders recoil at the notion that they could be seen as anti-Semitic or endorsing Holocaust denials, yet are confronting the ugly reality that many people actually believe these notions because of their own poor communications culture. But if or when change will come remains an open question. The structural and cultural roots of the current situation are deep, and will not be easily uprooted as they are closely connected to Pope Benedict's governing style. Similar criticism after the disastrous Regensburg speech led to little or no change. The percolating discussions regarding the creation of a policy coordinating body within the curia - and other possible solutions -- are hopeful signs. But they are not yet guarantees that change is coming. Stay tuned. End Comment.

NOYES