

ROBERT MICKENS

Benedict's Vice-Pope

It was the day after the 'Regensburg' speech when Tarcisio Bertone was installed as the Vatican's Secretary of State, and he hit the ground running. Since then this populist and voluble cardinal – fiercely loyal to his cerebral boss – has remained a controversial figure

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone would be the first to admit that he has not had an easy time as Vatican Secretary of State. In a recent interview, the 73-year-old Salesian confessed what almost everyone else already knew: "It has been a tough year." Tough, indeed.

Now in his seventeenth month in the post, the northern Italian cardinal has not only had to deal with the usual diplomatic controversies that come with the territory, but he has also had to cope with negative news reports that he himself has often generated. These have mainly resulted from his own personal penchant for frequently "issuing statements" in informal press scrums only to chide reporters later for quoting him "out of context". Thus he routinely has accused the "secularist" media for waging an "orchestrated campaign" to discredit, embarrass and attack the Catholic Church. This, in turn, has helped feed a growing victim mentality among many Catholics, especially in Italy.

But Cardinal Bertone's biggest obstacles are not from the outside world. Rather, they are found among certain segments of the Roman Curia where a wall of passive-aggressive opposition to him was already forming in the weeks when his appointment as Secretary of State was still just a rumour.

The curial "obstructionists" and other critics are still convinced that the cardinal lacks essential qualifications for such an internationally important job. Some of them quietly bristle at his lack of experience as a papal diplomat; for example, he was not groomed at the prestigious Accademia Ecclesiastica, as were they and most of the cardinal's predecessors of the past 300 years. Some point to what they call the cardinal's unspectacular academic career; one of his former *confrères* claims that professors at the Rome-based Salesian University awarded the then-Fr Bertone (also a professor at the time) his canon law doctorate behind closed doors, rather than requiring him to defend his thesis in the more customary setting of a "public defence". And still others consider the Secretary of State's cultural background as far too limited for his post; he has only ever lived in Italy and, while he claims familiarity with several foreign languages (but not English), he is not known to speak any of them with proficiency.



Tarcisio Bertone
SDB
Photo: CNS/
Alberto Pizzoli,
Reuters

In fairness to Cardinal Bertone, none of these apparent "deficiencies" could be blamed for the difficulties he encountered when he first took the reins as secretary of state. Although internal opposition was already bad enough, it was nowhere near as perilous as the new and unprecedented Vatican-Muslim crisis that awaited him when he officially took office on 15 September 2006.

His installation came just a day after Pope Benedict returned from a pastoral visit to Bavaria where the Pope's now-famous Regensburg lecture ended up angering most of the Muslim world. Due to the controversy – which has still never been totally resolved – the new Secretary of State was deprived of any honeymoon period and forced to set to work immediately on preventing more fallout from an unpredictable and volatile situation. Without a doubt, it was a "baptism of fire". Whether the cardinal or the Pope can be credited for achieving the current and more peaceful state of Muslim-Vatican détente, or whether this was due to other factors, is still open to debate.

The Pope probably has few genuine and long-time admirers or supporters more eager to serve him than the strapping Salesian cardinal. During nearly eight years (1995-2003) as secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), the then-Archbishop Bertone proved his worth. It is well known that he did much of the so-called "heavy lifting" for the prefect at the time – Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. And evidently the then future Pope never forgot it. As Benedict XVI approaches the third anniversary

of his pontificate, it appears increasingly more plausible that he may have picked Cardinal Bertone as his Secretary of State for the very reasons the curial "obstructionists" have opposed him.

In choosing an Accademia "outsider", the Pope was perhaps hoping for a right-hand man that would help him rid the Roman Curia of "church bureaucrats" and bring in new personnel more in line with his own theological and ecclesiological thinking. And while few people are under the illusion that the cardinal alone is making the major personnel decisions, his influence on the Pope cannot be discounted. How else does one explain the ever-increasing Italian population in the middle and upper ranks of the Curia? Or the fact that Italian continues to become more and more the only accepted language in what the Second Vatican Council hoped would be a fully "internationalised" papal curia?

Cardinal Bertone's view on this is conditioned by the fact that he is a Salesian. "I am and remain a priest of Don Bosco," he never tires of repeating. Although now present all over the world, the Salesians are undoubtedly the "most Italian" of all the major religious orders in the Church – even more so than the Franciscans. And having an especially outgoing Salesian as his top aide adds extra punch to the more cerebral Pope Benedict's main cultural project; namely, strengthening the Catholic Church's influence in Italy and, even more importantly, reawakening the Christian identity of Europe.

Cardinal Bertone believes strongly in the need for re-Christianising the Old Continent and sees Italy as playing the lead role in bringing this about. He speaks lovingly of his native country and its importance for the Church and Europe almost in messianic tones. In an interview with the Catholic magazine *Famiglia Cristiana* last Sunday he said Italians tend to see the world in a way that is "generous, caring and altruistic" because they are educated in the Gospel. "Families rooted in this teaching are the majority in Italy, but the media never seem to notice. Meanwhile, the Italian Church is highly esteemed both in Italy and abroad, both for its work of evangelisation inside the country, and for its cooperation with other churches throughout the world," said the cardinal.

No doubt the trust Pope Benedict has placed in him has only reinforced his convictions. Just seven months after making him Secretary of State, the Pope also named him his Camerlengo. This appointment ensures that Cardinal Bertone will effectively be the one who choreographs the current pope's funeral. Three other Secretaries of State in the recent past also served as Camerlengo. They were Cardinals Pietro Gasparri (from 1916 until his death in 1934), Eugenio Pacelli (from 1935 until he became Pope in 1939) and Jean Villot (from 1970 until his death in 1979).

Cardinal Bertone has tried to emulate some of the style of Pacelli, the future Pius XII. Despite the enormous intellectual, diplomatic and temperamental differences between the two churchmen, the current Secretary of State has been playing a ubiquitous public role in the past few months in much the same way his predecessor did in the 1930s. He has carried out high-profile and much-publicised travels throughout Eastern and Western Europe. He went to Peru last summer on a scheduled visit that happened to coincide with post-earthquake clean-up efforts. And he was the keynote speaker at a Knights of Columbus convention in the United States, despite not speaking English. He has spoken at universities, business clubs, the annual gathering of Communion and Liberation, and just about any other event that his schedule permits.

He says: "In response to the critics I have to say that from the beginning of my academic activities I have never wanted to close myself in an office to study papers." He adds that even people who hold "the highest and most important roles" in the Church should be out "meeting the people".

This populist touch has won him praise from many people – certainly at the beginning of his appointment. And it has marked a major change from his most recent predecessor, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, who was seen (perhaps unfairly) as a grey Vatican statesman, formal and distant from ordinary people. Most curial officials from the Sodano school of thought – and there are many – are not comfortable with their current boss' activism and are more convinced than ever that the Holy See's diplomatic work is most effective when it is done meticulously and without attracting headlines.

But Cardinal Bertone apparently sees himself as playing a far different – and perhaps greater – role than his predecessors. When he was first appointed last year, he said a retired, liberal-minded Italian bishop gave him this advice: "Bishop [Luigi] Bettazzi suggested that I be Secretary of 'the Church' more than Secretary 'of State.'" Canon lawyers and theologians can debate whether or not this is really part of his job description. But in the meantime, Cardinal Bertone will continue carrying out his "mission" as he sees it – being Benedict XVI's "spokesman". Or, as some would say, the Vice-Pope.

MONA SIDDIQUI

'Blaming another faith for the problems in one's own cannot be a solution'



Multiculturalism can be blamed for many things but not for the declining numbers of church-goers, that is to say Anglican church-goers. In his recent comments on the growing threat of Islamic extremism and its influence on British society, the Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali, warns that Britain is being given an Islamic character with the introduction of the call to prayer and the desire by some for the implementation of sharia law.

Furthermore, the bishop claims that there are no-go areas across Britain where it is too dangerous for non-Muslims to enter. This last point has aroused some criticism although many have conveniently overlooked an obvious fact – no-go areas of whatever kind are more to do with racial prejudices and poverty than religious affiliation.

Many in the Church support his views and fear that not only has the Church of England lost its place to Catholicism as the country's dominant religious group, but that very soon it will no longer remain the established Church of the nation. This is alarming for some, but blaming another faith for the problems in one's own cannot be a solution, even if it is done through an overt attack on multiculturalism.

I have urged Muslim communities to do some serious soul searching as to why a certain type of self-imposed isolationism and radicalism is growing here. I have spoken out against any implementation of sharia law as a legal paradigm for a minority people. But most of all I deplore the triumphalist tone among some Muslims when they are demanding their "rights" – whether it be in the workplace, in schools or in their communities.

Despite such problems faced by British Muslims, it seems obvious that most Muslims don't want less Christianity; they want more Islam. In other words Muslims may be on the defensive for a number of reasons, but not because they feel threatened by Christianity.

Whether or not the Government has made blunders in the name of multiculturalism is a matter of opinion, but the real challenge for

many Anglican Christians is not to feel threatened by Islam but to rethink the Christian values thought to be under threat. What is the Christian heritage of the UK? Should Anglican Christianity become the public face of this country, and if so how? Is this what the majority of the host society wants? At a time when the place of religion in public life has become one of the most hotly contested subjects in the academy and in popular discourse, wanting a more robust Christianity by wishing away the influence of Islam may be an honest but simplistic ambition.

As a British Muslim, let me be honest. I don't want the church bell to be replaced by the call of the minaret. I don't want a multicultural mafia holding every British institution to a political correctness test. But most of all I don't want every debate in Britain to begin and end with Islamic extremism. The pressure is on all of us to accept that British society is undergoing all sorts of changes, domestically and globally. Religious extremism is nothing new in Britain except that today it has become embedded in the perceived failures of multiculturalism. If we are to survive this as a collective society then we have to work effectively alongside the Government, rather than condemn the Government for establishing secularism as the dominant political voice.

Michael Nazir-Ali will no doubt be hailed as an honest spokesman by many in the Church. As an Anglican he should speak up about his fears for a Church that has held a bond with the State since the Reformation. But he is also of Pakistani origin, a person who knows something of the culture, history and attitudes of Pakistani and Indian Muslims. He has the ability to work with many of these communities, to help bring about the very integration he calls for. Rather than denouncing the Government for not displaying a "moral and spiritual vision", he should draw on his own Christian resources of dignity for all to challenge social and intellectual deprivation, which denies many in the minority communities a chance.

It is too late to undo the failures of multiculturalism but it is not too late to acknowledge that we all need to think carefully about how we make room for each other in this small but generous island.

■ **Mona Siddiqui is Professor of Islamic Studies and Public Understanding and Director of the Centre for the Study of Islam at the University of Glasgow.**