

Global South underrepresented in college of cardinals

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 19, 2007 All Things Catholic

In naming 23 new cardinals on Wednesday, Pope Benedict XVI chose to acknowledge one bit of demographic reality, but largely ignored a much bigger one.

Americans have noted, and rightly so, that the nomination of Archbishop Daniel DiNardo in Houston accurately reflects a shift in Catholic population in the United States away from the East Coast, towards the South and Southwest. From a global point of view, however, the new crop of cardinals is remarkably unrepresentative of where Catholics are today.

To understand that, it's essential to recall that Catholicism experienced a demographic revolution in the 20th century. In 1900, there were 266 million Catholics in the world, 200 million of whom lived in Europe and North America. Just a century later, there were 1.1 billion Catholics, only 380 million of whom were in Europe and North America, with 720 million in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The global South accounted for 25 percent of the Catholic population a century ago; today it's 67 percent and climbing.

You wouldn't know that, however, from looking at Benedict's appointments. Focusing just on the 18 new cardinal-electors, meaning those under 80 with the right to vote for the next pope, ten are Europeans and two are from the United States. (Three of the five over-80 cardinals named by Benedict XVI are likewise Europeans. Had Bishop Ignacy Ludwik Jez of Poland lived to receive the honor, it would have been four of six.) After these new cardinals join the church's most exclusive club in a Nov. 24 consistory, 60 of 121 electors will be European. Adding the cardinals from the United States and Canada, the total for the global North rises to 76 electors out of 121, meaning 63 percent.

To put this into a sound bite, two-thirds of the cardinals come from the global North, while two-thirds of the Catholic people live in the South.

Such disparities do not go unnoticed. The pope's announcement was made at roughly 11:30 a.m. Rome time, and within a half-hour I had an e-mail from *La Tercera*, a newspaper in Santiago, Chile, asking for a reaction to the following question: "Two-thirds of the nominees are from Western Europe or the U.S. Why?"

Why indeed? At least three reasons suggest themselves.

First, for all the efforts of the Vatican to deny that Benedict XVI is "Eurocentric," it's clear that the pope's core personal concern is with the fate of Christianity in the ultra-secularized milieu of Western Europe, which he has termed a "dictatorship of relativism." If one believes, as Benedict obviously does, that when Europe sneezes the rest of the world catches cold, then it makes sense to allocate limited appointments here.

Second, historically speaking, there's never been any pretense that the College of Cardinals should reflect the broader church. Originally, cardinals were the most important local clergy in Rome, responsible for running large Roman parishes, administering charitable programs, and advising the pope. It was only in the 12th century that popes even began to appoint cardinals who lived outside Rome. The first cardinals born in either Latin America or Africa to actually serve there were not named until the 20th century, and serious efforts to internationalize the College of Cardinals did not begin until the era of Pope Paul VI in the 1960s.

Third, Benedict XVI is a man of tradition, which means he feels bound to honor the custom that a whole litany of positions in the Vatican must be held by cardinals. Of the 18 new cardinal-electors Benedict named on Wednesday, the first seven were Vatican officials. Given that Europeans, especially Italians, are always over-represented in such positions, they're also over-represented among the cardinals.

These factors may make the preponderance of Europeans and North Americans more comprehensible, but ultimately they don't address the question of whether it's healthy for the church that its senior leaders are so unrepresentative of its actual membership.

That question has both an internal and an external dimension. Internally, it's fair to ask whether the college can develop a realistic grasp of the global Catholic situation when it's top-heavy with cardinals from a single part of the world, and one that accounts for a diminishing share of the population. For example, when the college met in April 2006, it spent a good bit of time debating the old Latin Mass. One wonders if that would have been the priority chosen by cardinals outside Europe and the States, in places where the post-Vatican II split between liberals and conservatives, of which debates over the old Mass are often a symbol, never really happened.

Externally, the current profile of the College of Cardinals cannot help but create an impression of a glass ceiling for Africans, Asians and Latin Americans. No matter how opaque Catholicism can seem to outsiders, few people fail to grasp the difference between a cardinal and everybody else. Given that the future of Catholicism in many ways lies in the global South, and that the church across much of the South faces stiff challenges from religious competitors, sheer self-interest, if nothing else, is likely to create momentum to make the college better resemble the Catholic map.

Drawing on the most recent edition of the *Annuario*, the Vatican's official yearbook, the global Catholic population breaks down as follows: Latin America, 43 percent; Europe, 22 percent; Africa, 14 percent; Asia, 11 percent; North America, 8 percent; and Oceania, 2 percent. If the College of Cardinals had 120 electors, and if it were an exact replica of the overall population, it would thus look like this: 52 Latin Americans, 26 Europeans, 17 Africans, 13 Asians, 10 North Americans, and 2 from Oceania.

While few would propose such rigid quotas, these numbers at least suggest that making the College of Cardinals look more like the church would require serious realignments.

Consider the math. Benedict XVI is determined to stay close to the limit on cardinal-electors of 120 imposed by Paul VI, and while to some extent that's an arbitrary number, going much higher would probably make the group unwieldy. Assuming a consistory every couple of years, a pope is generally looking at perhaps 20 open slots each time. If somewhere between five to ten are pre-assigned for Vatican personnel, the opportunities to create new cardinals elsewhere are seriously limited.

Changing the profile of the college, therefore, may require reducing the number of Vatican cardinals. For example, almost anyone who knows the church will rejoice in the selection of Archbishop John Foley, a gracious figure who has watched eight consistories come and go since 1984 without ever making the cut. But as a matter of policy, is it truly essential that the Pro-Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem be a cardinal? Or for that matter, the Archpriest of St. Peter's Basilica, or the Governor of the Vatican City-State?

Some reform-minded theologians argue that Vatican officials shouldn't even be bishops, let alone cardinals, in order to emphasize that Vatican agencies are supposed to serve local churches rather than micromanaging them. It doesn't require wading into that controversy, however, to venture the guess that the pope's "supreme, full, immediate and universal ordinary power," to use the language of canon law, would not be seriously compromised if the Archpriest of St. Mary Major, or the head of the Vatican archives, was a mere archbishop.

In addition, there are places where the limited number of spots for new cardinals might be better utilized. Here's a projection of what the top ten Catholic countries on earth will be in 2050, as measured by population:

- Brazil: 215 million
- Mexico: 132 million
- Philippines: 105 million
- United States: 99 million
- Democratic Republic of Congo: 97 million
- Uganda: 56 million
- France: 49 million
- Italy: 49 million
- Nigeria: 47 million
- Argentina: 46.1 million

As of Nov. 24, those 10 nations will have a total of 55 cardinal electors, but 41 come from Italy, France and the United States. The other nations have a combined total of just 14, four of whom are Vatican officials. The Democratic Republic of Congo, the largest Catholic nation on the continent with the fastest rate of Catholic growth, has no cardinal at all, and Uganda's lone cardinal is over 80. The Philippines has just three cardinals, with two electors.

By way of comparison, here are the Catholic nations with the largest number of cardinal electors:

- Italy: 22
- United States: 13
- France: 6
- Spain: 6
- Germany: 6
- Brazil: 4
- Mexico: 4
- Canada: 3
- Poland: 3
- India: 3
- Colombia: 3

It doesn't require a virtuoso ecclesiologist to ask, "What's wrong with this picture?"

Breaking this pattern will probably require fewer cardinals in the Vatican. If not Benedict XVI, then some future pope may well see that as a trade-off worth making.

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As the breakdown above makes clear, the United States is also strongly over-represented in the College of Cardinals, at least based on population numbers.

After Nov. 24, there will be 17 American cardinals and 13 electors, the second-largest totals after the Italians. For a term of comparison, consider that Brazil, Mexico and the Philippines, the other three Catholic nations among the four largest on earth, have 16 cardinals and just 8 electors, despite a combined Catholic population of 315 million to the roughly 70 million in the United States.

In the conclave of April 2005 that elected Benedict XVI, America had 11 voting cardinals, the same as all of Africa, even though Africa has twice the Catholic population. Brazil only had three votes, which, in crude mathematical fashion, works out to one cardinal-electors for every six million American Catholics and one for every 43 million Catholics in Brazil. Of course the church is not a representative democracy, but such wide gaps are nevertheless noteworthy.

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Speaking of cardinals, two weeks ago I interviewed Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, who will likely soon take over as president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Our conversation was wide-ranging, and at one point I asked the cardinal for a reaction to Jewish criticism of the pre-Vatican Latin liturgy, and specifically its prayer for the conversion of Jews on Good Friday.

I asked if the prayer could be changed, and this was George's response:

"Of course it can be done, and I suspect it probably will be, because the intention is to be sure that our prayers are not offensive to the Jewish people who are our ancestors in the faith. We can't possibly insult them in our liturgy ? Not that any group has a veto on anybody's prayers, because you can go through Jewish texts and find material that is offensive to us. But if we're interested in keeping the dialogue strong, and we have to be, we should be very cautious about any prayer that they find insulting. 'They,' however, is a big tent. What my Jewish rabbi friend down the block finds insulting is different from what Abraham Foxman [national director of the Anti-Defamation League] finds insulting. Also, it does work both ways. Maybe this is an opening to say, 'Would you care to look at some of the Talmudic literature's description of Jesus as a bastard, and so on, and maybe make a few changes in some of that?'"

That comment apparently drew protest from some Jewish leaders who felt George was mixing apples and oranges, comparing the normative liturgical prayer of the Catholic church to dusty rabbinical commentaries from centuries ago.

In response, George offered the following clarification, which I am happy to present in full:

"Regarding the possible change or omission of some texts in Talmudic literature that are offensive to Christian believers, the point is not to compare relatively obscure scholarly texts with liturgical prayers that have a much wider audience and influence, but to suggest that the controversy surrounding the texts in the 1962 Roman Missal might be an occasion for opening a wider dialogue. An endless cycle of recrimination neither reflects nor advances the strong and friendly relations that are now taken for granted by many in both the Jewish and the Catholic communities. Trusting in these relationships, why can't we discuss texts that are hurtful to either Jews or Christians and, if appropriate, suggest changes?"

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