

'Kind' and 'reliable' Jesuit named to Vatican's top doctrinal post

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 11, 2008 All Things Catholic

Last week brought a Vatican appointment that didn't exactly cut in the direction of what I call "affirmative orthodoxy," meaning Pope Benedict XVI's strong defense of the faith coupled with a gentle, positive style. Archbishop Raymond Burke, named as prefect of the Apostolic Signatura, instead has a profile as something of a cultural warrior.

This week Benedict XVI returned to form, with a nomination to a post arguably more consequential than Burke's. On Wednesday, the pope named Jesuit Fr. Luis Ladaria, a Spaniard, as secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

By all accounts, they don't come much more "affirmative orthodoxy" than Ladaria.

The vacancy was created when, on the same day, Benedict appointed Archbishop Angelo Amato, secretary of the CDF since December 2002, as the new prefect of the Congregation for Saints. The move puts Amato, 70, in line to become a cardinal, a typical Vatican way of rewarding loyal service. Given that the result has long been taken for granted, the more interesting question was always whom Benedict would tap as Amato's successor. In many ways, serving as secretary of the CDF -- traditionally known as *La Suprema*, or the "supreme" congregation -- is one of the most important jobs in the Vatican, especially under a pope who cares passionately about the theological underpinnings of policy choices.

A Jesuit, Ladaria was born in 1944 in Manacor, Spain, part of the Balearic Islands off the east coast of the Iberian Peninsula. He took a law degree at the University of Madrid in 1966, then a theology degree at the Jesuit-run Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology in Frankfurt. He earned a doctorate in theology at the Gregorian University in Rome, also run by the Jesuits, with a dissertation on "The Holy Spirit in St. Hillary of Poitiers." That background may have recommended Ladaria to Benedict XVI, very much a man of *ressourcement*, or a return to the sources of the church, especially the Fathers. Ladaria's interest in Christology may also be part of the picture, given that Christology has been a key doctrinal interest both of the CDF and of Benedict personally in recent years.

Ladaria taught the history of dogma at the Pontifical University of Comillas in Spain until his appointment to the Gregorian University in Rome, or the Greg, in 1984. There he put in a stretch as vice-rector from 1986 to 1992. His curriculum vitae includes 20 books and 83 academic articles. His current book project is *El Dios vivo y verdadero: el Misterio de la Trinidad* (The Living and True God: The Mystery of the Trinity).

Ladaria served as a member of the International Theological Commission, the main advisory body to the CDF,

from 1992 to 1997, and became a consultor for the congregation in 1995. In March 2004, he was named general secretary of the ITC.

As rumors of the appointment began to circulate early this week, I reached out to Ladaria's colleagues at the Gregorian and on the ITC for a "read" on who he is, and what one might expect from him at the CDF. It's telling that the two most common terms Italians used to characterize him were *gentile*, meaning "kind," and *affidabile*, meaning "reliable" -- both in the generic sense that he's a responsible, hard-working person, and in the more narrow ecclesiastical sense that he's strongly committed to church teaching. As I listened, it struck me that *affidabilità gentile* could serve as a rough Italian equivalent of "affirmative orthodoxy."

Here's a sampling of what I heard about Ladaria from various sources, some of them fellow Jesuits, some fellow theologians, and some Vatican personnel who've had dealings with Ladaria. The comments span the spectrum of theological positions, cultures, and languages:

"He teaches Trinity in the first cycle, and he's probably the most popular theology professor at the Greg. I would attribute that to his very lively and clear lecture style, his language skills, and his cordial behavior toward students, including those whose research he directs. The more 'classical' first-cyclers (American and French seminarians especially) also delight in Luis' clear orthodoxy ? He'll be a great loss."

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"Luis is a good man, learned and responsible ? He is a popular and well respected teacher/lecturer at the Greg. He is also a genial and understanding member of our Jesuit community ? Theologically, I would describe him as a 'moderate conservative'. He is not tied to any particular theologian."

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I know him quite well and I have great respect for him. He is a top shelf theologian, extremely hard working, and a very popular lecturer at the Greg. His optional courses draw as many as 150 students, and he directs a huge amount of theses. He is also very human. He laughs a lot, and is very gracious with the women who clean our offices etc."

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[Ladaria] was sent by his Spanish Jesuit province for basic level theology to Sankt Georgen in Frankfurt, where he learned the basics very well, studied the thought of the 20th century classics, and was steered to prepare for teaching systematic theology by deep study of a church Father. (He was influenced by H.J. Sieben, THE scholar of church councils). He did his doctorate at the Greg under Antonio Orbe (a world specialist on gnosticism and Irenaeus) on Hillary of Potiers

(attracted by his Christology, perhaps). ? By the early '80s he was full time at the Gregorian and gradually became a highly respected teacher and productive theologian. He turned out books in the areas he taught, more recently on Trinitarian theology, to which he shifted in the '90s. He was known for lucid presentations of complex theological topics and issues. Right now he's the best theological mind at the Greg and will be hard to replace. ? We used to think of him as a bit fragile, but he's developed an overall strength for multitasking, being on every important committee at the Greg, consulting for the CDF, joining the ITC, all while teaching and writing. His work as secretary of the ITC was going well in handling meetings and the work coming in from members on their different projects, which was his testing for the new job. He's good in the languages -- Spanish, English, French, German and Italian. Theologically he's centrist, I would say. Reserved, but in personal exchanges quite ready with grounded critiques of both positions taken at the left and right.

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He's a very sensible, fair kind of man and always approachable: a 'can-do' character. He chaired most of the ITC meetings. He never intruded his own theological views on any discussion -- in fact, I am not entirely sure what he thinks. All in all, I would be more uplifted than downcast by his appointment to the CDF. Indeed, I hope that the ITC does not lose his good offices.

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Ladaria was a great worker for Ratzinger for years, as a consultor at the CDF from the 1990s. He's a patristic scholar, a world-level expert on Hilary of Poitiers. At the Greg he taught various courses in systematic theology, for example on the Trinity. Both he and Amato were opposed to the book of Dupuis, but Ladaria is superior to Amato as a theologian.

(Note: the reference in the last comment is to the late Belgian Jesuit Fr. Jacques Dupuis, whose book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* drew a critical notification from the Vatican in 2001.)

It was impossible to find anyone who doesn't seem fond of Ladaria on a personal level -- for his work ethic, his scholarly achievement, and his warm disposition. Most say that Ladaria is robustly orthodox, open, and prepared to extend the benefit of the doubt to views with which he disagrees. One difference between Amato and Ladaria may be that Amato taught at the Pontifical Salesian University, while Ladaria was at the Greg, where he likely would have been exposed to a wider range of theological outlooks.

Three conclusions seem to follow.

One, in some ways what we are seeing under Benedict XVI is a return to the old days when the pope himself ran the Holy Office. Until 1968, in fact, the pope was formally the prefect of the Vatican's doctrinal office, appointing a cardinal to serve as secretary (later the title became "pro-prefect"). Benedict XVI has staffed the CDF with people who were close to him while he served as prefect, ensuring broad continuity with the direction

he set.

Two, Benedict XVI's litmus test for key appointments is not simply orthodoxy, but also content-area competence. Burke, for example, was named to head the Apostolic Signatura not primarily because of his tough stand on communion for pro-choice politicians, but because he's known as one of the best canonical minds at the senior level of the church. Ladaria likewise is known as an accomplished theologian who also is able to coordinate the work of other scholars effectively.

Three, the most sensitive jobs in the Holy See under Benedict XVI are generally going to "affirmative orthodoxy" personalities. In the end, I suspect this will be remembered as a defining feature of Benedict's papacy -- his intriguing way of blending the bitter with the sweet, of combining doctrinal clarity with personal *dolcezza*.

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Finally, three quick reflections on the significance of naming a Jesuit as secretary of the CDF.

First, one can't help but see the appointment as another sign of reconciliation between the papacy and the Jesuits. Benedict XVI now has two Jesuits in his inner circle: Ladaria and Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson. The pope may not have intended the appointment to have broader significance -- after all, he appointed Ladaria to the job, not his entire religious community. Nonetheless, given the well-known tensions between the Jesuits and John Paul II, the choice of Ladaria will be seen as a vote of confidence. That's an especially tempting interpretation in light of the warm reception Benedict XVI gave the Jesuits at the end of their General Congregation back in February, when the pope told the order: "The church needs you, it counts on you, and it continues to trust you, especially your ability to reach those physical and spiritual places where others can't go."

Reacting to the Ladaria appointment, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, Superior General of the Jesuits, issued a statement saying, "We accompany Fr. Ladaria with our prayers and our support. We hope and pray that he may help to build ways of dialogue in the service of the faith."

Second, while such expressions of gratitude and support from the Jesuits are no doubt sincere, they cannot completely mask a degree of ambivalence about seeing one of their own assume an administrative position in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the historical successor to the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition. As is well known, St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, was twice imprisoned by the Spanish Inquisition and questioned about his beliefs. While everyone recognizes that today's CDF is a far cry from the Spanish Inquisition (which, incidentally, was distinct from the Inquisition in Rome), nonetheless some Jesuits may feel a nagging sense that Ladaria's appointment is not exactly what Ignatius had in mind. One put it to me this way: "Ladaria is a great guy, and I would be thrilled with his appointment to the CDF -- if he weren't a Jesuit."

Third, this is the second time in a decade that the Vatican has deprived the Gregorian of a popular teacher and a workhorse faculty member. The first came in the late 1990s with the investigation of Dupuis, which effectively

ended his teaching career. Now Ladaria has been scooped up, though obviously on a much more positive note. The Greg is already struggling to attract young Jesuit scholars, many of whom prefer to teach at places such as Louvain or Georgetown, or even at secular institutions such as Harvard or the Sorbonne. In his statement on the Ladaria appointment, Nicolás indirectly alluded to this difficulty: "On the part of the society, I am confident that once again the generosity of the provinces will provide theology professors of competence and spiritual quality to continue the work of Fr. Ladaria at the Gregorian University," he said.

The Gregorian, as is well known, is where a broad swath of future leaders in the church are trained, including a disproportionate share of bishops. For the sake of both the society and the church, one hopes that Jesuits around the world respond affirmatively to Nicolás' call.

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