

Benedict's U.S. appointments follow a pattern

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 23, 2009



Archbishop Timothy Dolan and Auxiliary Bishop William Callahan at a reception at St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee. (CNS photo)

While Pope Benedict XVI's appointment of Archbishop Timothy Dolan to New York hardly marks a dramatic break with key picks under recent popes, it may confirm an intriguing pattern-within-a-pattern under Benedict when it comes to the most important jobs in the United States.

In a sound-bite, one might call it a choice for "the center-right with a human face."

In essence, that means leaders who are basically conservative in both their politics and their theology, but also upbeat, pastoral figures given to dialogue.

It's a pattern with across-the-board consequences for both the substance and the style of American Catholicism, and one that could carry particularly interesting implications for relations between church and state in the Age of Obama.

To be sure, any political taxonomy applied to the Catholic church is destined to be inexact. In rough-and-ready fashion, however, one could divide the U.S. bishops into four broad categories:

- The right: Bishops willing to use disciplinary measures to enforce orthodoxy in both faith and practice, who put much of their political energy into pro-life causes, who form strategic alliances with the Republican party and the cultural right, and who tend to take a dim view of the U.S. bishops' conference as a talk shop sometimes afraid to make tough choices.
- The center-right: Bishops who are temperamentally conservative but who prefer to set a tone rather than impose penalties, who give pride of place to pro-life issues but also devote energy to other social justice concerns, who are often more invested in concrete pastoral concerns rather than political battles, and who are willing to work within the bishops' conference as an expression of collegial relationships with other

bishops.

- The center-left: Bishops inspired by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, pro-life but inclined to accent a "seamless garment" of social justice concerns, loyal to Rome but willing to tolerate some diversity in both pastoral practice and theological expression, often seeing their role as a unifier, and prizing the bishops' conference as a vehicle for coordinated action.
- The left: Bishops steeped in the "spirit of Vatican II" who see themselves as heralds of further reform, emphasizing progressive social causes, leaning toward the Democrats, and often lamenting what they see as a decline in the willingness of the bishops' conference to engage major national questions as it did in the 1980s with pastoral letters on war and peace and the economy.

These are naturally abstractions, and a real flesh-and-blood bishop may well embrace elements of several camps. Nonetheless, the distinctions illustrate something about the diversity among the more than 400 bishops in the United States, a total that includes currently serving diocesan bishops, auxiliaries, and retired prelates.

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Though no one will quite say this out loud, the political reality of the American church is that elections within the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops tend to skew to the center-left, perhaps because it's the group that takes the conference most seriously. Bishops' appointments from Rome, meanwhile, generally favor the center-right. Some might see that as a valuable mechanism for balance, others as a prescription for paralysis, but in any event it has largely been the way of things over the last quarter-century or so.

Dolan's move to New York appears to cement how Benedict XVI is applying this broad approach to the most senior positions in the American church. The strategy is to name archbishops identified with the center-right, but men with reputations as consensus-builders rather than ideologues – hence "the center-right with a human face."

(To be honest, calling it a "strategy" may imply more premeditation than is actually involved. Who's available when a given job opens up, or who has the right skills set for a specific locale, are often as least as consequential as broad ecclesiological considerations. Even a pattern which is partly the product of chance, however, is nonetheless a pattern.)

The orientation may be especially crucial in the United States today, since the country's secular politics are dominated by a left-leaning government under President Barack Obama. In general, center-right bishops such as Dolan are eager to challenge Obama on the "life issues," but they also tend to shrink from polarizing measures such as communion bans for pro-choice Catholics, and they remain open to collaboration in other areas. In that context, elevating center-right leaders appears an option not to back-peddle on opposition to abortion and other perceived assaults on human life, but also not to gird the American church for cultural war.

Since he was elected to the papacy in April 2005, Benedict XVI has named new leaders for ten Latin Rite archdioceses in the United States, representing just under a third of the 33 archdioceses in the country (32 territorial archdioceses plus the military archdiocese.) Those prelates are:

- George Niederauer to San Francisco

- Donald Wuerl to Washington, D.C.
- John Nienstedt to St. Paul-Minneapolis
- Joseph Kurtz to Louisville
- Edward O'Brien to Baltimore
- Timothy Broglio to the Military Archdiocese
- Thomas Rodi to Mobile
- Dennis Schnurr to Cincinnati (as coadjutor)
- Allen Vigneron to Detroit
- Timothy Dolan to New York

In four or five cases, the appointments seemed to signify a transition from a center-left prelate to the center-right; Cardinals Theodore McCarrick of Washington and William Keeler of Baltimore, as well as Archbishops Thomas Kelly in Louisville, Harry Flynn in St. Paul-Minneapolis and Daniel Pilarczyk in Cincinnati, were all closer in some ways to the center-left than the men who replaced them. In other instances, Benedict's nominations have replaced one center-right figure with another, with Dolan's appointment to follow Cardinal Edward Egan in New York offering a clear example. Only in the case of Niederauer could one suggest that he's perhaps a touch more center-left than his predecessor ? Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome.

On the other hand, with the possible exception of Vigneron in Detroit, none of Benedict's key appointments in the United States have gone to bishops associated with the right either. Instead, the pattern seems to be to turn to more centrist prelates seen as good administrators and pastors, comfortable with the media and the public. Dolan's affable, relentlessly sunny persona represents a classic case in point.

In effect, one could say that Benedict's approach to senior appointments in the United States is consistent with a leadership style of "affirmative orthodoxy" ? a strong accent on fidelity to traditional Catholic identity, but presented in a decidedly positive key.

Of course, categories in any walk of life are never static, and several variables could redefine the ethos of what it means to be center-right in Catholic America. For example, an aggressive push from the Obama administration on the Freedom of Choice Act, or FOCA, could easily drive many centrists closer to the right.

For now, however, the option for the "center-right with a human face" seems fairly clear. Back in April 2005, some observers speculated that the election of Benedict XVI would mark a "Reagan Revolution" inside Catholicism. Judging by his senior appointments in the States, one could say the goalposts are indeed shifting, but not as far or as fast as those prophets had anticipated.

If label it one must, perhaps it could be slugged the "Benedict Evolution."

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