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Bishops welcome American's move to key Vatican liturgy post

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 17, 2009 NCR Today

tLiturgy dominates the formal agenda of the U.S. bishops during their spring meeting in San Antonio, and before the bishops even arrived in the Lone Star state they got a piece of what many regard as good liturgical news: Pope Benedict XVI?s appointment of Dominican theologian Augustine Di Noia, an American and former staffer for the U.S. bishops, as the new secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

tBy virtue of the appointment, Di Noia, 65, becomes an archbishop. As secretary, he will become the number two official in the Vatican?s office for liturgical policy. Since 2002, Di Noia has been the under-secretary, or number three official, in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where he served under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger prior to his election to the papacy in 2005.

tBefore moving to the Vatican in 2002, Di Noia had served as executive director for the U.S. bishops? Committee on Doctrine and taught theology at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C.

tObservers say that over the years, Di Noia has acquired a reputation for intelligence, competence, and a strong work ethic. Theologically he?s generally seen as something of a conservative, but few regard him as an ideologue. Those who have worked with Di Noia typically describe him as open and supportive.

tDuring the 1990s, the Congregation for Divine Worship played a key role in a string of high-profile battles over liturgical policy, generally pushing bishops? conferences around the world to adopt a more traditional, Roman-centered approach to liturgical translation and celebration. That effort forms part of a broader concern for revitalizing a strong sense of Catholic identity, which Benedict XVI and his advisors have identified as the top priority of this pontificate.

tThe ?liturgy wars,? as they came to be known, were especially intense in English-language zones, in part because of the broad influence of the English language around the world, including swaths of Asia and Africa.

tAmong other things, the push on liturgy has resulted in a new translation of the Roman Missal, the main collection of prayers for the Catholic Mass. Having already approved several components of the Missal, the bishops will vote on several others in San Antonio and a few remaining items later this fall. Final Vatican approval of the entire Missal is anticipated in 2010.

tThe new Missal has long been controversial for what some see as its preference for archaic and unfamiliar language. Virtually every expert agrees that when it eventually appears, there will be a need for considerable education among both priests and people in the pews about how the text ought to be understood and applied, including the theological logic for the choices made.

tIn that context, observers say, having a sympathetic American ear in a senior Vatican post ought to be of considerable help.

tCardinal Francis George, president of the USCCB, issued a statement yesterday welcoming Di Noia?s appointment.

?He always showed himself a fine scholar dedicated to the pursuit of truth and a generous co-worker available to friends and colleagues,? George said. ?The bishops of the United States are grateful that Archbishop-elect Di Noia will bring his talents to the Vatican office responsible for the liturgy and sacraments throughout the entire world.?

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