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'Digging in our heels' against Obama won't work

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 30, 2009

Pope Benedict XVI greets U.S. Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond of New Orleans after presenting a pallium to him during a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican June 29.

Rome

Archbishop Gregory Aymond, who will formally be installed as the new shepherd of New Orleans on August 20, has long been considered a rising star within the U.S. bishops? conference, and a leader of what might loosely be called its ?moderate? wing. A native of New Orleans, Aymond taught and served as rector of the archdiocese?s Notre Dame Seminary, and was made an auxiliary bishop in 1996. He took over as bishop of Austin, Texas, in January 2001, after a six-month stint as coadjutor.

During Aymond?s tenure in Austin the diocese grew dramatically, including a bumper crop of 45 seminarians this year, triple the number when he arrived. Aymond also pioneered an innovative program in lay ministry and oversaw the creation of a Catholic high school targeting disadvantaged students. Aymond also played a key leadership role on the national stage during the sexual abuse crisis, serving as chair of the bishops? Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People.

Aymond takes over an archdiocese that's seen more than its share of heartache. Aside from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, tumult also surrounded Aymond's predecessor, Archbishop Alfred Hughes, over his handling of sexual abuse cases, both in New Orleans and during his tenure as an auxiliary bishop in Boston under Cardinal Bernard Law. The crisis broke in Boston just three days after Hughes took over in New Orleans in 2002. More recently, Hughes has also drawn fire for closing 34 parishes after Katrina; angry parishioners have petitioned Rome and sued Hughes in state courts.

Aymond has defended Hughes as a man who's been "misunderstood."

Aymond was in Rome this week to receive the pallium, a band of woolen cloth symbolizing the duties of his office and his bond with the pope. On Tuesday, he sat down at the North American College for an interview. Highlights include his reflections on lessons learned from the sexual abuse crisis, including a strong defense of the ?zero tolerance? policy but some ambivalence about disclosure of sensitive documents, and his non-confrontational approach to the Obama administration.

?To just take a stance of digging our heels in and saying that we have differences will accomplish nothing, and I don?t think it?s the spirit of the gospel,? Aymond said.

The full text of the interview follows.

Interview with Archbishop Gregory Aymond of New Orleans
June 30, 2009

Just out of curiosity, when you get the pallium, what do you do with it?

You put it in your suitcase and bring it home. They give you a box ? it looks like a little church. Its sides come up to a point, and it fits right in there. I?ll be bringing it back to Austin, but I can?t wear it there. I also can?t wear it here in Rome, so the first time I?ll use it will be the day of my installation in New Orleans. Otherwise, it stays with my other vestments in this container.

You grew up in New Orleans. Who was the archbishop then?

Rummel [Joseph Rummel, who died in 1964], then Cody [John Cody, who moved to Chicago in 1965, became a cardinal, and died in 1982], then Hannan [Philip Hannan, who retired in 1988.]

As a young Catholic boy, those guys must have seemed like the right hand of God to you.

Yes, they did indeed. Rummel was of course the great patriarch. I was there in his later years, when he was already blind. His sisters and his secretary would literally read his mail to him. I remember going to the chapel at Notre Dame Seminary for his wake and seeing him laid out there. I also remember the controversy around integration. He took a stand, and excommunicated some people for that. [Note: In 1962, Rummel excommunicated three local Catholics who opposed the desegregation of Catholic schools.] He was the great patriarch, the father of the family, the untouchable. I also remember being present on the streets of New Orleans to welcome Archbishop Cody when he came in.

Given the awe you felt for Archbishop Rummel, what does it mean to be going back as the Archbishop of New Orleans yourself?

It?s very, very humbling ? very humbling. I would never have dreamed that it would be in God?s plan or his will for me to be a bishop of the church, let alone the archbishop of New Orleans. It?s also humbling to be going back to New Orleans as a native son, because New Orleans has never had a native son as archbishop.

Your appointment was rumored for a long time. At what stage did you start to take it seriously?

I started thinking about it because people would joke about it, so I heard the comments, the jokes. Of course, when any diocese opens, it seems that the rumors and the jokes start about the native sons. Even for the dioceses that are open now, you hear that sort of thing ? ?oh, he?ll be coming back,? and so on. Frankly, it got to a point where two things went through my mind: First, it?s so widely joked about and rumored that it will never happen, because that?s usually how it works. Second, facing the possibilities in prayer, I would ask, ?This won?t happen, will it?? But, I?ve been taught in spirituality to pray for holy indifference, for the ability to be indifferent to everything else expect God?s love and God?s call.

Are there things about this assignment that you find particularly exciting or particularly challenging?

The challenges are fairly clear. First of all, they?re still rebuilding from Katrina. There are a lot of social justice issues related to that rebuilding as well. The second issue going on there is the restructuring of parishes, which

has caused a great deal of interest and controversy among some. It?s a pretty small number, but nonetheless it?s a group that has been loud. I realize I?ll be facing those things.

I think the advantage that I bring, though it can be a two-edged sword, is that I know the city and I know the culture. It?s a very Catholic city. I know a lot of people in the community. I know the priests of New Orleans, and I have a great deal of respect for them. I?ve known them as peers, as brother priests, or I taught them in the seminary expect for the last nine years. I think all that is a blessing, although I hope the prophet is acceptable in his own country!

You?re coming from one of the most affluent dioceses in the country, in Austin, into one that has been devastated. How do you make that transition?

I?ve given that a great deal of thought, because it is very different. Austin is rather affluent, it?s a young community, it?s very technologically oriented, it?s the capital, and it?s also the home of the University of Texas and many other universities. So it does have a great deal of resources, and that has been an advantage. The disadvantage there is that it doesn?t have a strong sense of Catholic identity ? it?s Texas. New Orleans doesn?t have some of the financial resources, but it does have a strong Catholic identity. Also, the people of New Orleans are very good ? when they see the need, there?s a great deal of generosity. Without doubt, the hurricane and the economy have had enormous effects, but I think we?ll be able to get the resources we need to continue the mission of the church.

Has Archbishop [Alfred] Hughes given you any tips?

My heart really goes out to him, because I think he?s a very good man, a very prayerful man. I think he?s a very holy man. He came to New Orleans at a very tough time, and I think in many ways has been misunderstood for a lot of the things he?s done. I have no doubt that he?s a man who loves the church, loves God, and has tried to do his best.

His tips to me? Well, let?s say that he and I agree on the advice of, ?Take it slow. Come in and get to know the situation.? I?m aware that I?ve been gone for nine years, and a lot has changed. One of the reporters asked me at the news conference, what are your plans and goals and objectives? I said it?s very kind of you to think that I have some. My first 100 days is just going to be to go around to the deaneries, to go around to the parishes, to reconnect with the priests, the people, the culture, to get a sense of what?s going on. Although I?ve visited there during the summers and over Christmastime with family and friends, I can?t say that I really have a sense of what?s happening.

You?ve made a point of saying that you?re not going to revisit the parish closings worked out under Archbishop Hughes. Why not?

I?ve given this serious thought. I know that there was a great deal of prayer and pastoral reflection that went into this pastoral plan. It?s not my objective to second guess the prayer and the planning of others, but rather to move ahead. Those decisions have been made, and I don?t think I should reconsider them now.

Some of those decisions frankly could have been made many, many years ago. Changing demographics made that clear. There were a lot of ethnic parishes, as we all know, as they have in many cities ? a French parish here and a German parish there, sometimes on the same block. That?s not sustainable. Yet at the same time, I also know that it?s always very difficult, and very painful, to close a parish ? where my mother was baptized, where I made first communion, where I was married. That?s terribly hard, so my heart really goes out to people as I see some of their memories blurred and shaken. I?ve watched this happen in New Orleans and in other dioceses, and I don?t know any place that?s been through where it hasn?t been incredibly difficult.

Archbishop Hughes was criticized in some quarters for his handling of the sexual abuse crisis. What?s

your reading of where things stand on that now in New Orleans?

Frankly, that?ll be part of my learning curve. I know they have policies, but I really haven?t studied them. My attention has been on the policies for the diocese of Austin, which we were actually working on before the crisis began. We were very fortunate in that. After that, my attention was on the national scene.

So what?s your message for the typical Catholic in the pew in New Orleans who wants to know what approach you?re going to take on the sex abuse crisis?

My approach will be very strongly to follow the charter, including zero tolerance and showing compassion for victims. I will meet all victims, which I have done in Austin. Anyone who?s made an accusation, I meet with them. I?m willing to listen, and to try to provide any kind of pastoral assistance. So, [my approach] will be to follow the charter and to reach out to victims, but also to deal compassionately with priests. Even those who are the perpetrators deserve charity, and in their illness they deserve kindness.

Eight years after the crisis erupted, you?re convinced that zero tolerance is still the right way to go?

Yes. We?re dealing with activity that is unhealthy psychologically, obviously sinful, and it?s criminal intent. When you put all that together, I don?t think we have a choice if we?re really going to stand for the values of Christ and the integrity of the church. I don?t think we have a choice. I also think that those countries which have not gone that route have had an even tougher time. Some have realized now they?re going to have to do so, to protect their own integrity.

I covered the first few years of the crisis from Rome, and I remember well that there was ambivalence here about the zero tolerance policy. Many canonists, and even some Vatican officials, said that it flies in the face of canonical tradition, which leaves discretion to judges to make punishment fit the crime. Others said it was unchristian, since we believe in redemption. What do you pick up these days in Rome about the American norms?

That?s a tough question. I say that very honestly, because I?m not sure I can read their minds and hearts.

In the end, Rome gave the recognitio for five years and then renewed it ?

That?s right. I think they had some very legitimate concerns and some very legitimate doubts. My belief is that they have seen this bring back the integrity of priestly ministry, and as a means of purification and repentance. I would think that there is a nodding to understand, with some reluctance, that this probably was the right route to go.

Do you have the sense that other bishops? conferences around the world are looking at the charter as a model?

They are indeed. I know that. Especially those that have been hard hit are looking toward the United States and what we have done. We do an Anglophone conference of bishops, and I have the impression that these bishops see us as leaders, if that?s the right word, in this area in a couple of ways. One is the charter and the strong stance of the zero tolerance policy. That?s not a matter of condemning people, or of saying that there can be no forgiveness for the perpetrators, that they?re beyond God?s mercy. All we?re saying is that they should not be in ministry, and that?s an important distinction. The other thing many other countries are looking at is the John Jay study. That has been very, very helpful. It hasn?t given us all the answers, but it?s given us a lot of them, so that the crisis won?t repeat itself in the future.

What do you believe to be the most important findings from the John Jay study?

One would be that this is pretty much limited to a certain time period, as the study has shown us.

You mean the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s?

Yes. A second thing, although this is still a lingering question, is how treatable the whole issue of pedophilia might be. Third, we know that seminary formation addresses these issues today in a way that it did not thirty or forty years ago.

Finally, I think it?s helped us think about the safety of children. Education is really the preventative measure in all of this. We can deal with the victims and the perpetrators after it happens, but what I think the John Jay study has shown us is that we really have to come up with programs on the front end so that we create a culture of a safe environment.

Are you content that for the most part, this has already been done?

I think so. It has been done in dioceses. My concern, and it?s a natural concern, is that once the crisis is over and we get into these programs being just a part of the fabric of who we are, there?s not as much attention given to these things. That?s why I think it?s very important that we still have the audits. As time goes on, and as we get further away from 2001/2002, this may become part of what we do every day, but sometimes the diligence with which it?s implemented lessens. That?s why the audits are important, because they call us to an honest accountability.

There are priests who still raise due process concerns, saying accusations have been made against them but never settled one way or the other, so they?re in a sort of limbo. What do you tell them?

That?s the down side of the charter, and of the world in which we?re living. I agree there are some problems. For one thing, a person can be wrongly accused, and we have to be very carefully about process for that reason. The other thing is that sometimes the due process of the church, and her courts, can take so long that the person is really not dealt with in justice. That?s not in all cases, but there are cases where it?s been drug out for a long time with no real clarity, and the person?s reputation is at risk.

How do you explain cases like that? Is it the local bishop, local tribunals, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, or what?

I don?t think it?s the Congregation for the Faith. In most cases, from my limited knowledge, I think it has to do with local processes. Especially if you get into a formal process, there still aren?t that many canon lawyers in the United States who have the skills to do this. You have to make sure to get the right people to do it, and it?s a lengthy process. In most cases, this is not their full-time job. They?re doing it as a service to other dioceses. When you put all that together, I think it does create some difficulties.

What about the issue of disclosure of records? Some dioceses have made almost all their case files, correspondence, and so on public, while others have fought disclosure tooth and nail. Are you in favor of making as much public as possible?

I have some real concerns about that. I guess it depends upon what documents. If it?s the psychologicals, there are obvious confidentiality issues. There are dioceses that have released all the names of everyone who ever had an accusation, but I would not go that route ? I think we have to be more discerning. To just release all the names in all the files can create some serious problems.

You know that anything less than full disclosure risks perceptions of a cover-up.

I realize that. But for the sake of justice, for the sake of a person?s reputation, and for the sake of justice, I don?t think we can just release everything. Nor would most companies, nor would most organizations. Just putting all the names out there, with some accusations proven and some not ? I think it?s against canon law and the charity of the church, because do we really have a right to judge and sentence people before the process?

Overall, where would you say the American church stands on the crisis?

As this has gone on, we?ve learned much more about the problem. Of course, as we know from the John Jay study, it was more or less limited to one era and some things that were going on in the world as well as in the church, because the church is a reflection of the world. As we discovered the depth of the crisis, I have no doubt that God was calling us to a purification and to repentance. We?re still in the process of purification and repentance, and that will go on for a long time, but I think the church is stronger and healthier now than it was before the crisis began.

Obviously your primary job is to run the church in New Orleans, but archbishops sometimes also play national leadership roles on particular issues. Archbishop Hughes, for example, became involved with liturgical policy, sitting on the Vox Clara Commission. Is there an area on the national stage where you?d like to make a contribution?

I?m presently on the committee for priestly vocations and consecrated life. Obviously that?s something I?ve had experience in, so I?ll continue that. I?m also on the committee for laity, family and youth. I enjoy that work and will continue to do so.

You?ve designed a fairly innovative program of lay ministry in Austin. Is that a particular interest of yours?

It is. I believe that the document [of the U.S. bishops], ?Coworkers in the Vineyards of the Lord,? really reminds us that there are many people who are interested in lay ministry, some of whom are really called to lay ministry, but being called isn?t enough. There has to be formation and education. So, we now have a ?Diocesan Institute for Ecclesial Ministry.? That?s an umbrella which deals with the formation of the permanent deacons, lay ecclesial ministers, and people in spiritual direction. During the pastoral year, seminarians participate in that as well, so you all these people ? future priests and deacons and lay ministers ? who are getting to know one another. At the same time, we really do keep unblurred lines between ordained and non-ordained ministry.

You?re convinced that it?s not a zero/sum game, that you can invest in lay ministry without it coming at the expense of vocations to the priesthood?

I don?t see it that way. In Austin, we have 45 seminarians, which is an all-time high. At the same time, lay ministry is very alive and active. The plan is that the lay ministers will go through a three and one-half year program of human formation, spiritual formation, education and pastoral formation. At the end, they would get a certificate saying they had finished the program. They could then be commissioned by the bishop in order to do ministry in the diocese. The institute began in September. It?s all in place, and we?ve been planning for it for five years.

Do you have any way of counting how many lay ministers you have in the field right now?

Like in all dioceses, it?s very hard to count. It?s a mixed blessing, because you have people out there who are well educated and well formed, but you also have people who are well intentioned but not well educated or well formed. In both categories, you have some who are full time and some who are part time. In any reasonably sized diocese, certainly in Austin, we?ve got thousands. Frankly, that?s one of my concerns. We?ve got all those

people out there, and in some cases they?re not given very good education or formation. I see lay ministers not only doing ministry, but I also hope they will train the trainers, that they would be the people able to provide formation for the others.

We?re here just a few days before the July 10 visit of President Barack Obama to Pope Benedict XVI. What do you think about how Catholics ought to relate to this administration?

First of all, I think we have to pray for and work with the administration. To just take a stance of digging our heels in and saying that we have differences will accomplish nothing, and I don?t think it?s the spirit of the gospel. There are serious disagreements, especially on the pro-life issues, and especially on abortion. But we have to be in conversation, we have to be in dialogue, and we have to work with the administration. Of course, while as Americans we can disagree with the president, there?s also a level of respect we have to have for the office. Personally, I have some real disagreements, as well as the church, but I think we can never give up. God never gives up on us, and we can never give up on other people. We have to continue to be part of the political process. With the president and the administration, we have to be in dialogue and to consistently present our position and ask for recognition of that.

There are Catholic universities in New Orleans. If one of them wanted to invite President Obama to speak on its campus, would you be comfortable with that?

I think there?s room for a person to speak at a university. To honor that person, however, is something that the bishops have clearly spoken out against.

Are there circumstances under which you think it would be appropriate to have someone like Obama or Vice President Biden speak at a Catholic university?

Yes, particularly in the forum of a healthy debate where some of these issues, in a very academic way, could be addressed. I don?t mean debate with arrogance or violence, but to be able to take these issues and discuss them in a serious way. I think there?s a place for that, and I think universities can help us do that.

Of course, commencement ceremonies typically don?t lend themselves to that sort of thing. Are you saying that as a general rule, these guys shouldn?t be invited to give commencement speeches?

I would say that in general, it?s not beneficial to have those kinds of people giving talks at commencement. The very fact of inviting them is sort of honoring them. It?s even a bigger problem to gave them an honorary degree. Here?s the other thing: Given the vast number of people you could invite, why not hold up someone and let someone deliver a message that is the message of the Catholic church and the Christian faith?

Where are you hopeful that the church and this administration can do things together?

Hopefully, health care. Hopefully, greater care for the poor and housing. Hopefully, in terms of employment. On those issues, there is the possibility of us working more closely together.

We?re also expecting the pope?s encyclical on the economy. What sort of message would be helpful for the people of New Orleans?

I think one point is something that he always says, which is that we have to go through our own personal transformation in order for a system to be transformed. That means we as a diocese, and as individuals, have to be more committed to social justice and to equality. As I?ve been saying in Austin too, we have to lift up those who have lost jobs and homes, and in some cases lost hope. Those who have not been hard hit by the economic crisis have a double responsibility, to help those who are suffering. That?s true for individuals and for the

church as a whole. One of the great social forces in New Orleans, for example, is Catholic Charities, and all this gives added importance to what Catholic Charities does.

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