

Abuser priests belong in church but not in ministry, new archbishop says

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

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

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Archbishop George Lucas, who turned 60 earlier this month, will be installed in Omaha on July 22, becoming the 11th shepherd of the Nebraska archdiocese. Originally from St. Louis, he graduated from Kenrick Seminary in 1975 and was ordained a priest the same year.

While serving in a string of parishes, he also finished a master's degree in history at St. Louis University. From 1990 to 1994 he was chancellor of the archdiocese under Archbishop John May, and then — fatefully, some might say — he served as vicar general under then-Archbishop Justin Rigali, who had just returned from Rome after a long Vatican career, which ended with Rigali as the number two official in the Congregation for Bishops. Rigali today is the cardinal of Philadelphia and a member of the Congregation for Bishops, which votes on recommendations to the pope for bishops' appointments around the world.

Lucas was named bishop of Springfield, Illinois, in October 1999, and then appointed to Omaha at the beginning of this month. He's in Rome this week to receive the pallium, a band of woolen cloth that symbolizes both the duties of an archbishop and his bond with the pope. He sat down this afternoon for an interview at the North American College.

The conversation covered a lot of ground, including the universality of the church, the sex abuse crisis and the U.S. bishops' "zero tolerance" policy (Lucas is strongly supportive), the coming meeting between President Barack Obama and Pope Benedict XVI, Rigali's influence in bishop-making (Lucas said tactfully that Rigali has been "very supportive") — and, finally, whether this George Lucas is sick of all the "Star Wars" references that the name he shares with the other George Lucas inevitably evokes.

The full transcript of the interview follows.

Interview with Archbishop George Lucas of Omaha

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Most American Catholics may never have heard of the pallium, and some of those who have may be tempted to think of this event as little more than a chance for you guys to have a good time in Rome before you start your new jobs. Can you talk about how you see the spiritual and theological significance of it?

An important part of the pope's ministry, which he shares with the diocesan bishops, is to draw the church together and to help people see the reality of the unity that the Lord intends for the church. There's nothing like being there, being face to face with people, to help encourage that. It's like the way dioceses bring people together for different occasions. Sometimes it's done for not much more of a reason than to try to get a

representative group of people together, so they can be together, pray together, worship the Lord together. This is something of the same thing. It brings new archbishops from around the world to be in the presence of the Holy Father, and to receive from him a sign of the office of archbishop. As you say, the pallium itself may not mean a lot to people, but I do think people count on the church holding together and having this dynamic unity as much as possible. That's a big part of my making the trip, to reaffirm my own loyalty to the pope and to feel that connection with him, that's he's offering with the appointment and also with the pallium. Then I'll go to my new archdiocese, to Omaha, to communicate that, to help us through my teaching and my own pastoral ministry to be Catholic in the richest sense, not to be an isolated place.

I wonder if you would agree that sense of being part of the universal church is something with which American Catholics struggle in a particular way. Sometimes it seems we're awfully focused on our own internal issues.

You may be on to something. It can also be especially difficult for Americans sometimes to see that faith is something I receive, not something that I do, or something that we all kind of do together. That can make it difficult to even think about belonging to a worldwide church, if the faith is something we're somehow constituting here. To receive this appointment, now to come to Rome to receive the pallium, and then to go to Omaha to communicate to the people that I've been sent by the Holy Father in the name of the Lord and that it's part of their Catholicity to receive me ? I would hope that doing all that can help communicate that the faith is a gift we receive, it's not something we do.

All my ministry's been in the Midwest, and I don't know if isolated is quite the right word, but it's just in the middle ?

I grew up in Western Kansas ?

Hey, I don't apologize for it, I love it. But certainly geographically, it's isolated from a lot of places in the world. Of course, the Internet is counteracting that for some people, certainly not for everyone. At least people who are interested, who look for it, are more connected. I think this is part of the reason that Pope John Paul revived the custom of people coming to Rome to receive the pallium, inviting the archbishops to bring people from their archdioceses who can experience this.

To ?learn Rome,? as John Paul used to say.

Yes, and just to see the universality of the church. Yesterday I was sitting next to an archbishop from Sri Lanka and one from Burkina Faso, and suddenly there's Nebraska in between those two places. It was certainly a great reminder to me. Now I didn't have much of a chance to get much of a group together [to make the trip], because of the timing of my appointment. But part of the hope is that the archbishop will bring people with him who can experience some of the diversity and unity that's possible, and then bring that back to their own families and their parishes, and talk about it. They also hope that the local Catholic press will cover it, and allow some of that to come back home.

Do you know Omaha well?

Not well. I'm learning about it, of course, by the Internet and other ways. I was rector of Kenrick Seminary in St. Louis and we had students from Omaha, so I was there several times for ordinations and first Masses, that kind of thing. Of course, I was there for the announcement, and they gave me a whirlwind tour for a whole day. So I have an impression, which is very favorable at this point.

You probably remember that several years ago a discussion was started by Cardinal Bernard Gantin about bishops moving from one diocese to another, which was later joined by then-Cardinal Ratzinger. Both expressed ambivalence, on the grounds that a bishop is supposed to be married to his diocese. Do you think that as an outsider who's already been a bishop somewhere else, you have some advantages?

There are certainly some advantages to having already been a bishop for nine and a half years. That's probably the big thing. But I also think to have somebody come and take a fresh look at things [is helpful]. People get to present themselves at the archdiocesan church and in various apostolates, and perhaps they stop and think about how to explain this stuff to somebody from the outside, why we do what we do. I think there can be a new energy in that.

It's hard, though. I said yesterday that I've been living in two worlds [since the appointment], and I'm very excited in one of them, but I also have mixed feelings about leaving the Diocese of Springfield. I've tried to work hard there for nine and a half years, and at some point it becomes home. You're not quite sure when that happens, but it does. I think I did it with the sense that I was going to be there for the rest of my life, so I wasn't trying to do some half-baked things that somebody else was going to have to deal with. I was relatively young when I went there, and I had the sense that I would continue to walk with people through some of the things that we started. In human terms, I'm a little disappointed not to be able to see some things through. My hope and my prayer is that the next bishop will have just what he needs to start a new chapter. But it's still hard, if you take that wedded to the diocese thing seriously.

Of course, it's not hard to say yes to the pope. There was no reason why I couldn't. But, the 'yes' means a lot of things.

Isn't it pretty much expected that 'yes' will be your answer?

It is. If 'yes' is the answer, you put it in writing so that it's an explicit 'yes,' it's not taken for granted. Although, we were all kind of remarking among ourselves that the current nuncio [Archbishop Pietro Sambi] is very direct about what the pope wants. But that's fine, there's a great freedom in that.

To Americans from the coasts, the Midwest often looks like this one big undifferentiated space. But early on, have you noticed any differences between Springfield and Omaha that jump out at you?

Both have large rural areas. The Diocese of Springfield is actually a little larger geographically, but it's really spread out. There's no one place where most of the Catholics live. Omaha is a much bigger city than anything in the Springfield diocese. About a third of the parishes are right there in Omaha, so there's a concentration of Catholic people. Institutionally, it's very strong. You have large Catholic institutions like Creighton and Boys Town. There's also a very large Catholic school system, both elementary schools and high schools. We also have that in Springfield, for its size. It's something I'm going to have to learn, but I think there will be a lot of similarities. I'm a city boy myself, so it took some getting used to, being in a rural diocese. I'm hoping to get my feet on the ground in a hurry. In one way, being in a slightly more urban setting may mean less time in the saddle, having lots of the parishes close to one another. Those parishes that are farthest from the cathedral, however, are farther away [than in Springfield] ? they're a little over 200 miles away.

Your primary responsibility is the local church, but are there areas where you'd like to play a leadership role on the national scene?

We'll see what's needed. I was involved in seminary formation and I'm interested in it, both in terms of the formation of candidates to the priesthood but also the ongoing formation of priests. I sat on the old priestly life and ministry committee in the bishops' conference for several terms, though of course all that has been

reorganized now. Catholic education too is an interest. But, you know, I don't have national aspirations. I respect the conference and I'm happy to do my share, but my time in Springfield was pretty much focused on the local church. I was very involved in the province and in Illinois with the other bishops, in the [state] conference. Of course, now I'll have a different role as the archbishop, with the other two bishops on issues that pertain to the welfare of people there, particularly as regards the teaching of the church. As I say, I'll try to do my part in the conference and we'll see where that leads.

In looking at Omaha, do you have the impression that you're stepping into a couple of fires you'll have to put out, or do things seem fairly stable and it's a matter of building upon what's already happening?

My impression is that it's very stable. The faith runs very deep. Parish life and family life are strong there. I hope to encourage that and to build upon what's happened. Because Catholic education is such an important part of the life of the archdiocese, there are always a lot of challenges with that, in terms of facing the rising costs of maintaining schools and making sure they're really part of the Catholic faith.

You don't have to close down parishes in the first year or anything like that?

I don't foresee any enormous pastoral challenges at the moment. The biggest pastoral need for me at the moment is to get to know the place - that's the big challenge.

From a distance, it also seemed that Omaha weathered the storm of the sex abuse crisis fairly well. Is that your impression?

Right, my initial impression is that they've corresponded well to the charter and have good child protection and safeguard programs.

Broadly speaking, you're still confident that the charter is the way to go?

We're looking at a possible tweaking of it, but essentially I think it was a very good move. It hasn't been completely without difficulties in terms of implementing it, but I'm happy with the way it's been implemented in the Springfield diocese.

That includes the zero tolerance policy?

Yes, although I'm not sure what everybody means by that. As a bishop, to be able to say to people that there's nobody serving in public ministry that's had even one credible accusation of abuse is very important. It's important for me to say that, and it's important for people to hear that. I believe that it's important to the presbyterate at large, to be able to face the people with confidence and have people say that about them.

What do you mean that you're not sure what people mean by "zero tolerance"?

Well, that language is not in the charter. It doesn't say "zero tolerance." It's your term, and it's what people use. What I mean is just what I said, that we can say there's nobody in ministry who's got a credible accusation of abuse of a minor.

Many canonists in Rome, 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. After eight years of experience, you're convinced it serves the pastoral good of the church?

I am convinced. I think we can accept the mystery of sin and redemption, and preach it. There's a place in the

church for people who have offended in this way, but it's not in active ministry as far as I'm concerned.

In a few days, President Obama will be visiting the pope. What's your view of how the church ought to relate to this administration?

Well, it's not my responsibility to teach civics, and certainly not to teach politics, but I would certainly advise Catholics to respect the president and to respect the office, to pray for him and to wish him well. It's not in anybody's best interests for the president to make mistakes or to not be able to exercise his role and authority in an appropriate way. For myself, and I think many Catholics, there's a real objection to his approach to issues of human life, particularly with regard to abortion. It doesn't appear that he's going to change his position on that. He says he would like to have dialogue, and I think Catholics should always be prepared to talk about our understanding of the dignity of human life, to offer that understanding as a gift and as part of a conversation. But I don't think it's a conversation that can lead to a compromise.

Do you have any concern that a "photo op" with the pope might somehow undercut the church's message to the president on matters of human life?

I don't think so. The pope's position couldn't be more clear, not just on the defense of human life but also about the understanding of objective truth. There are things we can know and understand to be true about what it means to be human and how humans are supposed to act. He's not backing away from that. I don't know what their private conversations will be. Presumably, the president will be briefed on some of the pope's teaching. The pope greets the president as a head of state, and I think people will understand that well enough.

Have you followed the commentary about the Obama administration that's been coming from various voices in the Vatican such as L'Osservatore Romano?

Not really. I've seen comments on the comments, but that's about it.

There's an impression of a difference in tone between the Vatican and some of the U.S. bishops vis-à-vis Obama, and I wonder if you see that as pastorally unhelpful.

It's always pastorally helpful for us to be clear about what the church teaches, and I think that part is clear. How we as bishops of the United States, or as the Holy See, react to an individual person in a particular circumstance — you know, judgments are made about that, and they won't always be the same.

Were you among those bishops opposed to what happened at Notre Dame?

Yes.

What if they'd invited him to speak without the honorary doctorate? Would that have changed your thinking?

I would have thought about it differently. What exactly my conclusion would have been, I don't know. Giving the honor was certainly a problem.

Especially in light of the bishops' 2004 document [which called on Catholic institutions not to honor politicians who hold views opposed to church teaching]?

That's right. I thought it couldn't be more clear, that Catholic universities shouldn't be honoring someone whose stated position and committed position is contrary to what we teach? I do think that to have the President of the United States on a college campus can be seen as a legitimate thing. Part of the problem is that this

invitation came so early in the administration, and so soon after he made decisions that seemingly will increase the opportunity for abortion here and abroad, and provide support for that. That made it hard to defend giving the invitation at that moment. But to think that the president would never appear on the Notre Dame campus, to talk, or to visit as president ? that shouldn't be the case.

You can envision circumstances under which inviting the president to a Catholic campus would be appropriate?

There could be circumstances, sure. I wouldn't rule that out.

We're awaiting the pope's new social encyclical, on the economy. What message would be pastorally helpful?

First of all, I think just the fact that the pope is taking the time to consider how he says it is hopeful. From what I hear, he is concerned to not say something that will seem superficial in light of the crisis. I think he's a good teacher, and it will be worth listening to. What's most important is to shine the light of faith on people's circumstances, both on their real economic circumstances and then our fears and our confusions about it. I would hope to see, and I think we will see, a reiteration of the fact that material things are given to us as a means to do good, both for ourselves and for other people. There's also a common good that both individual economic decisions and economic systems ought to be made to serve. Any of us who are teachers or preachers want to try to address the questions people are really asking, and not just be spouting off. I sense that's what the pope wants to do in this circumstance, to bring the light of the gospel to the real crunch that people are feeling in their lives and in their families.

You talked yesterday about the fact that three out of the five new American archbishops this year have ties to St. Louis. Do you think there's some defining characteristic or quality of a St. Louis priest that you then bring to being bishops?

That's probably better for somebody else to say, who would observe us and maybe listen to somebody from there. I'll say this: the presbyterate is very strong there. Speaking for myself, though I think it would be the sense of many, I'm very proud to be part of the St. Louis presbyterate. When I was living there, but also since I left and in very relevant ways, I've found that guys are very supportive of one another. They're interested in their brother priests' success. I don't mean that so much in a material sense, but in some places you observe, and I also hear about, clergy being competitive with one another or jealous of one another.

Fr. Andrew Greeley always said that envy is the original sin of clerical culture.

Yes, but I have to say that I never experience that in St. Louis, and I don't think it's very much a characteristic of that clergy. I think priests are ordained into that presbyterate and kind of grow up into it expecting to be supported, and they are. As I think about it, that's why I've tried to talk about and to introduce to the priests I've been working with the last nine and a half years.

How far back do you think that goes?

It goes pretty far back. Twenty years ago or more, we would have these priest convocations, and especially in the early years of doing that we would often start with a kind of prayerful remembrance of some of the giants of the past, priests who had done extraordinary work in all kinds of ways. Everybody kind of sat up and took pride in it, but they also felt like they were responsible to do something similar even though the circumstances were different. So, I think the spirit I'm talking about goes back generations among the priests.

Part of the reason I ask is because people look around at the number of bishops with ties to St. Louis, and are tempted to conclude that it's an index of the influence of Cardinal Rigali. Is that right?

[Laughs] ? I don't know. For sure, many of us who served with him learned a great deal from him. I would be one of them. He's been very supportive of me, both as a priest and as a bishop, I can tell you that much.

Last thing: Are you sick to death of all the ?Stars Wars? references?

I'm having to face it all over again, having gone through it once. It's fine. I always tell people that the other George Lucas has a lot more money and a lot more imagination than I do. I think he's a little older than I am, but we're close to the same age.

At what point in your life did you become aware of him? Was it at ?American Graffiti,? or when?

I remember coming across the name when I was in college. I don't remember what I was looking for, but I found him in an index or something.

Do people come up and say ?The Force be with You??

Occasionally, maybe when they meet me for the first time. Once in Springfield, I was visiting a high school ? it was for an assembly, it wasn't a liturgical thing. As I walked in, somebody played the music from ?Star Wars.?

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