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Our church: ever new, ever ancient

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 13, 2009 NCR Today

One of the great things about the Catholic church is the way that the ancient and modern get thrown together in such surprising ways. This weekend?s ordination of Archbishop J. Augustine DiNoia, O.P. as titular archbishop of Oregon City provided a host of such moments.

The rite itself is very ancient, and the insignia of the office -- the crozier, the miter and the ring -- all date back to the Middle Ages at least, and in their symbolism, even further. The crozier is a reference to Christ the Good Shepherd, for example. In the event, the actual crozier used in this ceremony once belonged to another Dominican prelate, Bishop Edward Dominic Fenwick (1768-1832), the first bishop of Cincinnati, and that is rather ancient by American standards. The miter has roots in the attire of the priests of ancient Israel. The chasuble is, of course, a toga and what changed was that the rest of us stopped wearing togas.

Washington?s National Shrine of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception (which is such a mouthful) hosted the liturgy. This church was consecrated in the 1950s, just in time to be somewhat out of date with the liturgical norms of Vatican II, but its vast sanctuary is ideal for a rite like this where dozens of priests and at least twenty-some bishops and archbishops were present. I have always preferred the Crypt Church for worship, but the sonorous space of the Upper Church worked with the brass choir and organ. There was plenty of room for the twin thrones, one for the principal consecrator, Cardinal William J. Levada and the other for the newly ordained archbishop. One of the principal co-consecrators, Cardinal Canizares Llovera, was unable to attend: He got to the airport in Rome and had forgotten his passport. By the time it was retrieved, the plane had left. In 1914, the ship taking Boston's Cardinal William Henry O'Connell to Rome for the conclave after the death of Pope Pius X was diverted to New York to pick up Cardinal James Gibbons. The two days lost made the difference as the two arrived in Rome just in time to hear the bells ringing out that Benedict XV had been elected.

I have never seen so many Dominicans in one place. Their presence alone provided a continuity with the ages. As the new archbishop said in his brief remarks at the end, the church has been so blest by the Dominican Order through the centuries. The cell phones and digital cameras were a less ancient aspect of the ceremony, which had been planned, we were told, through the exchange of countless e-mails between Rome and Washington over

the past month.

So, our old church is ever new even while she is ever ancient and her communion does not only cross the oceans, it crosses the centuries. Even the titular see, Oregon City, which now exists only in title since the bishopric was transferred to Portland in 1928, shows how the church conserves all that went before. In the end, however, the ceremony was not so much about the way we humans adapt to the times. It was about God and his work in us, as Archbishop DiNoia said in his impressive and impressively brief remarks [1] at the end of the service. His words are worth listening to, and they will only take two minutes of your time. Put down your Blackberry and listen.

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[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c70m1zOM1wI