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Burke's influence is set to grow

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 6, 2009

Archbishop Raymond L. Burke (CNS/Paul Haring)

Analysis

Archbishop Raymond Burke?s Oct. 17 appointment to the powerful Congregation for Bishops offers an illustration of how in the Vatican, even the ordinary can be extraordinary.

The appointment means that the 61-year-old Burke, a frequently polarizing figure during his 12-year run as a bishop in the United States, is now in a position to put his stamp on the next generation of Catholic bishops all over the world.

At one level, Pope Benedict XVI?s decision to tap Burke for the role was the dictionary definition of pro forma. Of the 33 members of the Congregation for Bishops at the beginning of 2009, 25 were current or former Vatican officials, including Burke?s predecessor as prefect of the Apostolic Signatura, the church?s highest court. (Burke was actually appointed on Oct. 17 along with another recently installed curial official, Spanish Cardinal Antonio Cañizares Llovera, who heads the Vatican?s liturgical office.)

That preponderance of Vatican prelates is partly because the Congregation for Bishops has to vet nominees from around the world, and Vatican officials control the archives where possible skeletons may lurk. In addition, the Congregation for Bishops meets for an entire morning every two weeks, and it?s simply more practical to expect prelates based in Rome to show up.

Yet seen through American eyes, Burke -- who?s widely expected to become a cardinal in the next consistory, the event in which new cardinals are installed -- is hardly just another Vatican official.

As the bishop of La Crosse, Wis., from 1995 to 2003, and then as archbishop of St. Louis from 2004 to 2008, Burke earned a reputation as a strong conservative voice on matters of both faith and politics. During the 2004 election, Burke publicly said he would not administer Communion to Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, a Catholic and at the time the Democratic nominee for president. He also once blasted a benefit concert by pop singer Sheryl Crow for a Catholic children?s hospital in St. Louis because she?s pro-choice.

Since being called to Rome in 2008, Burke has hardly gone quiet. In a September 2008 interview with an Italian newspaper, Burke said that the U.S. Democratic Party risks becoming the ?party of death? because of its positions on bioethical questions. He?s also insisted that nothing can justify voting for a candidate who?s ?anti-life? and ?anti-family.?

As a member of the Congregation for Bishops, Burke now has a seat at the table when possible new bishops are evaluated and proposed to the pope. (The Congregation for Bishops handles most appointments in the Catholic church, except for those in mission territories, which are prepared by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, and those in the 22 Eastern rites in communion with Rome, which are handled by the Congregation for Oriental Churches.)

Burke becomes one of five Americans who sit on the congregation, the second largest national bloc after the Italians, who have 12 -- nine cardinals, including Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, the congregation?s prefect, and three bishops. The other four Americans are Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia; Cardinal Francis Stafford, former head of the Apostolic Penitentiary; and Cardinal Bernard Law, archpriest of Rome?s Basilica of St. Mary Major.

Like other important Vatican offices, the Congregation for Bishops has a staff that handles its day-to-day operations, but policy is set by the formal members of the congregation who are appointed by the pope. While many offices have full meetings of members only once a month or less frequently, the Congregation for Bishops meets more often because of the high volume of nominations to be reviewed.

When a diocese becomes vacant, it?s the job of the papal nuncio, or ambassador, in that country to solicit input on the needs of that diocese and to work with the local bishops and bishops? conference to identify potential nominees. The nuncio prepares a *terna*, or list of three names, which is submitted to the Congregation for Bishops, along with extensive documentation on the candidates.

Members of the congregation are expected to carefully review all the documentation before meetings, and each is expected to offer an opinion about the candidates and the order in which they should be presented to the pope. Ultimately, it?s up to the pope to decide who?s named to any given diocese, but in most cases popes simply sign off on the recommendations made by the congregation.

To be sure, Burke?s nomination doesn?t mean he can single-handedly control who becomes a bishop, whether in the United States or anywhere else. For one thing, he?s simply one of five Americans on the congregation, and the least senior. At least initially, his input on American appointments is unlikely to be decisive.

Most observers say that aside from the pope himself, the two most powerful players in determining who becomes a bishop in the United States today are the current nuncio, Italian Archbishop Pietro Sambi, and Rigali of Philadelphia. (Rigali is a longtime veteran of Rome himself, and a close friend of Re.)

By itself, Burke?s appointment doesn?t alter that calculus. Sambi in particular is believed to have reservations about the pugnacious, and occasionally partisan, episcopal style that Burke came to symbolize.

On the other hand, Burke?s influence may grow with time.

He?s by far the youngest of the current crop of Americans on the congregation (the next youngest, Levada, is 73, and Rigali is 74). Since appointments are for five-year terms and may be renewed until a prelate reaches the age of 80, Burke could be involved in bishops? appointments for the next two decades. At some point he may well become the senior American in the process, with a correspondingly greater impact.

Whatever happens, one thing seems clear. If anyone suspected that the decision to bring Burke to Rome last year was a way of muzzling him, or limiting his influence in the United States, it certainly doesn?t seem to be playing out that way.

John L. Allen Jr. is NCR *senior correspondent. His e-mail address is* jallen@ncronline.org.

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