

New archbishop faces tough questions

Marie Rohde | Jan. 22, 2010



Archbishop Jerome E. ListECKI during his Mass of installation at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Milwaukee Jan. 4 (CNS/Ernie Mastroianni, Catholic Herald)

MILWAUKEE -- For Archbishop Jerome E. ListECKI, the honeymoon ended almost before it began.

Installed Jan. 4 as Milwaukee's 11th archbishop, ListECKI was welcomed with a ceremonial cathedral installation and a City Hall reception featuring Polish dancers and the home team's baseball caps.

However, within days he was also facing tough questions on the archdiocese's role in the lingering sexual abuse scandal, the possibility of bankruptcy, and his reputation as a tough-minded "political bishop."

Although ListECKI, 60, is described as a priest cut from the same cloth as his predecessor, genial New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan, Milwaukee's new Catholic leader has in his early days here come across as an uncompromising conservative ready to call out Catholics who stray from traditional church teachings.

In interviews, conservative talk show host Charlie Sykes hit ListECKI with tough questions, many first raised by the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP.

SNAP criticized former Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland's participation in ListECKI's installation. Weakland retired in 2002 after it was revealed he had used \$450,000 in archdiocesan funds to hush a former male lover. More recently, he admitted in court documents he shredded papers involving child sex abuse allegations.

"He's a bishop of standing in the church," ListECKI told Sykes, defending Weakland's role in the ceremony.

Sykes pushed on, asking ListECKI if his position reflected insensitivity to the sex abuse issue: "The question is, do you get it?"

ListECKI, who was cohost of a Chicago radio talk show in the mid 1970s, replied: "Not only do I get how serious it is, I am living with the consequences. ... I get it big time, but at the same time we have to move forward."

ListECKI brushed aside SNAP's demand for the removal of a bronze bas-relief at St. John the Baptist Cathedral.

The bronze portrays Weakland in the place of Jesus as the protector of children.

Michael Skwierawski, former president of Milwaukee's Polish Community Center, said Listecki's Polish roots are important to some local Catholics, but the quest for a Polish archbishop -- so important in the early 1900s that it caused a divide in the Milwaukee church -- is now a dim memory for most.

"What he does on the issues that are important today -- the sex abuse scandal and the role of women in the church -- is what people are looking for," said Skwierawski, a retired chief judge of Milwaukee County.

Several lawsuits are pending against Catholic church in Wisconsin. Some \$20 million has been paid out to victims. The scandal has also cost the Milwaukee archdiocese countless dollars spent on legal fees as well as the treatment and salaries of priest offenders.

The largest settlement came in 2006 in a case in which the Milwaukee archdiocese agreed to pay a \$16.65 million settlement to 10 victims of California priests. The priests had been moved there after abuse allegations first surfaced in Wisconsin.

Insurance paid about half the cost, the remainder was paid by the archdiocese. The sale of the Archbishop Cousins Catholic Center, a former junior seminary once used as the church's headquarters, was supposed to pay the church's portion. The property has not sold and the archdiocese has taken out a loan to pay the debt.

The archdiocese has already hinted at the possibility of bankruptcy.

"We will have to look at that," Listecki said this week. "My sense is that if it's for the good of the church we will go forward and do that."

Meanwhile, Mass attendance in the archdiocese has dropped. Terrence Berres, a Milwaukee lawyer who writes a blog on church issues, analyzed archdiocesan figures last year and concluded the church had lost about 39,000 Catholics in the past year. While the drop may be the result, in part, of cleaning up the rolls, the figure was stunning.

Berres is also pushing the archdiocese to release detailed financial accounts.

"If we received detailed information about what that money is or isn't accomplishing, perhaps we'd give more money, more time and more attention," said Berres, a former parish council member still active in church affairs.

Other money issues are on Listecki's plate as well.

He will take over a \$105 million capital fund drive to benefit elementary and high schools in the 10-county archdiocese. Initiated in 2007, the campaign has collected only about \$28 million of the \$92 million pledged.

Listecki has degrees in moral theology and has both canon and civil law degrees. He describes himself as a pastoral priest, but he has called himself a law-and-order bishop.

In recent months, he criticized Indiana's University of Notre Dame for honoring President Barack Obama, admonished House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for her interpretation of church teaching, and chastised the Young Catholics for Choice support of artificial contraception.

He has not ruled out refusing the Eucharist to those who fall out of line. Listecki supported Providence, R.I., Bishop Thomas Tobin's decision to ask Rep. Patrick Kennedy to refrain from taking Communion because of his stance on abortion issues.

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Source URL (retrieved on 01/28/2015 - 14:28): <http://ncronline.org/news/people/new-archbishop-faces-tough-questions>