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Cardinal William Baum: dictionary definition of a 'churchman'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 29, 2010 All Things Catholic

Cardinal William Baum is sort of the Brett Favre or Cal Ripken, Jr., of the American Catholic church, touted not just for what he's done but for how long he's done it. Having logged seven years as Archbishop of Washington (1973-80) and three decades of Vatican service, Baum is now the second longest serving cardinal in American history, behind only the legendary Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore.

Today 83 and obviously frail, Baum would take over first place on March 8, 2011.

Two weeks ago, the North American College in Rome gave Baum its Founder's Award, citing his "long and tireless priestly service."

Never anybody's idea of flamboyant, Baum is regarded by admirers as the dictionary definition of a "churchman," someone whose life is devoted to quiet, loyal service. Cynics might instead classify Baum as the sort of "company man" who does well inside the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. In any case, Baum's relatively low profile can sometimes obscure an important biographical point: There's almost no Catholic drama of the last half-century in which he hasn't played some sort of role.

Born in Dallas in 1926, Baum's father was a Presbyterian, and he takes his last name from a Jewish stepfather -- perhaps helping explain Baum's lifelong interest in ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue. He grew up in Kansas City, Missouri, where he was ordained in 1951 by Archbishop Edwin O'Hara, considered a pioneer of Catholic social action. During the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Baum was a *peritus*, or theological advisor, to Bishop Charles Helmsing of Kansas City, and in that role Baum helped to draft *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the council's decree on ecumenism.

From 1964 to 1967, Baum directed the first office on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs for the U.S. bishops, developing lifelong friendships with a variety of leaders from other Christian churches and other faiths. After a brief stint as chancellor of the Kansas City diocese, Baum was named the bishop of Springfield-Cape Girardeau in 1970. It was an overwhelmingly Protestant area where, by most accounts, Baum's deft ecumenical touch won high marks.

The "game-changer" in Baum's career came in 1973, when Pope Paul VI appointed him Archbishop of Washington, D.C. Among other things, Baum waded into the racial tensions which marked life in the nation's capital, earning him a reputation as a fairly progressive social leader. In May 1976, when Baum was named a cardinal by Paul VI at the tender age of 49, U.S. News and World Report described him as "a Texan known particularly as an ecumenicist and antiracist."

To be sure, there were signals that Baum wouldn't go down as a friend to the church's dissident wing. In 1979, he informed Fr. Charles Curran at Catholic University, known for his liberal views on sexual morality and doctrinal dissent, that the Vatican had him in its sights, and he also refused to renew the priestly faculties of Salvatorian Fr. Robert Nugent over questions about his pastoral ministry to homosexuals. Baum was also a member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith when the Vatican launched investigations of Edward Schillebeeckx, Jacques Pohier and Hans Küng.

Critics would charge that Baum had changed his spots, moving from center-left at the time of Vatican II to a more conservative position as the winds shifted in the church.

In the main, however, Baum seemed to try to avoid public spats. For example, he declined to crack heads when a Georgetown parish invited clowns, jugglers and daredevils to perform in the sanctuary on Palm Sunday in 1979, and when his decision to buy a half-million dollar residence drew fire, he sold the property and bought something cheaper.

One aspect of Baum's record which marked him as a man of influence, but which would later seem ambiguous in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis, is his role as mentor to Cardinal Bernard Law. (In the argot of reporters and cops, Baum has always been seen as Law's "rabbi.") Baum groomed Law as his successor in the ecumenical office at the bishops' conference, and as bishop of Springfield-Cape Girardeau. He also successfully lobbied to have Law named to Boston in 1984.

As soon as Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Poland was elected Pope John Paul II in October 1978, rumors began to swirl that Baum was headed for Rome. The two men knew one another well; Baum hosted Wojtyla in 1976 when the rising Polish star visited the United States for a Eucharistic congress, and Wojtyla returned the favor when Baum visited Poland. (The story goes that Wojtyla was charmed by Baum's secretary, Monsignor James Gillen, who made breakfast while they were together. Thus when the new pope arrived in Washington in 1979 with both Baum and Gillen on hand, he bounded down the steps of the papal plane, spotted Gillen, and blurted out: *Due uova strapazzate*! Let history thus record that John Paul's first words in the capital of the Free World concerned scrambled eggs.)

Baum and Wojtyla were also both members of the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education, responsible for overseeing seminaries and Catholic colleges and universities around the world. It was thus hardly a shocker when John Paul II appointed Baum to run the congregation in 1980. (As a footnote, the job was available only because then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, turned it down. Shortly after his election, John Paul wanted to bring Ratzinger to Rome to run the Congregation for Catholic Education, but Ratzinger said it was too soon after being named Archbishop of Munich in 1977. In 1981, however, Ratzinger accepted when John Paul offered him the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ? and the rest, as they say, is history).

In that role, Baum's main legacy was to prepare John Paul's controversial 1990 apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, which insisted on tighter ecclesiastical control, including a requirement that theologians obtain a license (called a *mandatum*) from the local bishop. Baum steered the evolution of the document but was replaced by Italian Cardinal Pio Laghi shortly before it was issued. During the early 90s, Baum also served on the commission that drafted the new Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Already struggling with chronic eye problems, Baum took over the Vatican's Apostolic Penitentiary in 1990, a post he would hold until his retirement in 2001. He continued to sit on a number of Vatican congregations until his 80th birthday in 2006, including the Congregation for Bishops, where he helped to shape a generation of episcopal appointments in the United States and around the world.

In recent years, Baum has taken on the role of ecclesiastical elder statesman. When in Washington, Baum lives in a residence once occupied by Cardinals Patrick O'Boyle and James Hickey. (Having three archbishops in the same archdiocese, two of them retired cardinals, can make for some musical chairs. With Baum in the residence, Archbishop Donald Wuerl lives in an apartment carved out of an attic above a Latino parish. Retired Cardinal Theodore McCarrick lives in an apartment in another Washington parish -- close to the airport, since he's still racking up frequent flyer miles at a clip that would make George Clooney's character in "Up in the Air" envious.)

In the conclave of April 2005, Baum was one of only three cardinals under 80 and thus eligible to vote who had been appointed by Paul VI. One of the others, Cardinal Jaime Sin of the Philippines, was too ill to participate and would die two months later; the other, Ratzinger, would emerge as pope. Baum and Ratzinger are thus the only two men alive who have voted in three different papal elections -- the two conclaves of 1978, and that of 2005.

Behind the scenes in Rome, Baum is known as a gentle soul (some Swiss Guards call him "the gentle cardinal") and a friend to Americans in the Eternal City, including acting as an advocate and sounding board for laity working in and around the Vatican. Baum also enjoys a reputation as a widely read and deeply cultured man, as well as a patron of the arts.

If the standard for inspired leadership necessarily involves having a larger-than-life persona, Baum may not qualify. For those who believe, however, that getting out of bed and doing one's job over the course of a lifetime counts for something -- in ecclesiastical parlance, serving the church as it wishes to be served -- then Baum's version of a "consecutive games" streak is worth recording.

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I've frequently observed that what baseball is to sports, Catholicism is to religion. Both venerate tradition, both foster obscure rules -- think about the infield fly rule or the Pauline privilege, for example -- and both are obsessed with statistics. (These days, one could add that both baseball and Catholicism are especially big in Latin America!)

One guy who's sort of the Catholic equivalent of Bill James, i.e., an acknowledged master of ecclesiastical records and stats, is Salvador Miranda of Florida International University, who operates a web site called "The Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church." Anybody who's ever needed the skinny on a Prince of the Church, living or dead, is probably in Miranda's debt.

Pondering the possibility of Baum passing Gibbons got me wondering how many American cardinals there have been since 1875, when John McCloskey of New York became the first. I popped the question off to Miranda, and before I could finish my first morning cup of coffee, the answer came back: Forty-eight. Miranda provided a breakdown by century: Two in the 19th century, including Gibbons; forty-two in the 20th century; and, so far, four in the 21st.

This being Miranda, he also supplied a tidbit of trivia: Four of these American cardinals were born outside the United States, with all four coming from just two foreign countries. I suspect most Americans, after a moment's thought, could name one of those two countries: Ireland, the birthplaces of Cardinals John Farley of New York,

John Joseph Glennon of St. Louis, and Timothy Manning of Los Angeles.

Can you come up with the other?

(Answer: Portugal. Cardinal Humberto Medeiros, who led the Boston archdiocese from 1970 to 1983, was born in Arrifes Sao Miguel, Portugal, in 1915.)

Finally, it's worth a brief word about Gibbons, whose record Baum may overtake. Born in Baltimore and made a cardinal in 1886, Gibbons was a lion in his time, a stalwart defender of organized labor and author of enormously popular works such as *Faith of Our Fathers*. The famed American writer H.L. Mencken once said of Gibbons: "More presidents than one sought his counsel. He was a man of the highest sagacity, a politician in the best sense, and there is no record that he ever led the church into a bog or up a blind alley. He had Rome against him often, but he always won in the end, for he was always right."

[John L. Allen is *NCR* senior correspondent. He can be reached at jallen@ncronline.org.]

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