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Naming Pell to Bishops would be a landmark move

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 10, 2010 NCR Today

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Rome

tI?m in Rome at the moment, preparing to leave early Tuesday on Pope Benedict XVI?s May 11-14 swing in Portugal. Ecclesiastically speaking, Rome is very much a company town, so speculation about who?s in line for what job is always in the air. These days attention is focused on possible successors to Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, who?s held the job for the last ten years and who is now 76.

tRecently, the well-connected Italian Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli reported that Pope Benedict XVI has found his man for the job at the Congregation for Bishops: Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, Australia. Pell, who?ll turn 69 in early June, has been the Archbishop of Sydney since 2001 and a cardinal since 2003.

tTrying to predict appointments is a notoriously hazardous enterprise, and until the daily bollettino from the Holy See Press Office appears with Pell?s name on it, nothing?s for sure. Yet if Pell is indeed the new prefect, it would be a landmark move for at least four reasons.

tFirst, the appointment would be widely seen as a victory for the conservative wing of the church, since Pell has long been an outspoken voice for conservative positions on virtually every issue in Catholic life. He?s a classic example of ?evangelical Catholicism,? meaning that fostering a strong sense of traditional Catholic identity in contrast to secularism is his top concern. Putting Pell at the helm of the Congregation for Bishops would help ensure a robustly ?evangelical? stamp on bishops? appointments around the world.

tSecond, a Pell appointment would be another victory for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ? known in Rome as the ?Holy Office? and tagged by the Italians *la Suprema*, the ?supreme? congregation ? in its long-running rivalry with the Secretariat of State. At a very broad level of generalization, senior officials such as Re who come out of the Vatican?s diplomatic corps are generally known as middle-of-the-road pragmatists, while those who move in the world of the Holy Office typically are more concerned with doctrinal clarity. That?s not to say theologians can?t be flexible, or that diplomats aren?t concerned with ultimate truth, but there is nonetheless a cultural and psychological distinction between the two worlds.

tPell is not a theologian by training ? his Ph.D. from Oxford is actually in church history. Yet in the eternal tension between the Holy Office and the diplomats, his affinity is very much with the former. He served as a member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith between 1990 and 2000, while he was an auxiliary bishop of Melbourne and later archbishop. He?s well known to the pope, and openly campaigned for the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger during the conclave of April 2005.

tThe election of a pope from the Holy Office obviously implied a shift in power within the Vatican, and the appointment of Pell to the Congregation for Bishops ? traditionally considered the most important Vatican office after the Secretariat of State and the Congregation for the Faith ? would more or less make things complete. The current Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, is himself a product of the Holy Office,

having served as Ratzinger?s top aide there from 1995 to 2002.

To date, Benedict XVI has appointed six of the nine prefects of Vatican congregations. (Re, along with Cardinals Franc Rodé in Religious and Zenon Grocholewski in Education, are holdovers from John Paul II). Most of Benedict's prefects are part of his extended network from the Holy Office: Spanish Cardinal Antonio Cañizares at the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments is a former member of the Congregation for the Faith known as the ?little Ratzinger? for his closeness to the pope, and his top deputy is American Archbishop Augustine Di Noia ? another former Ratzinger aide. Archbishop Angelo Amato at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints succeeded Bertone as Ratzinger?s secretary in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and American Cardinal William Levada in the Holy Office worked under Ratzinger and later served as a member of the congregation.

Traditionally, it?s been considered natural for the prefect of the Congregation for Bishops to come out of the Secretariat of State, since the ?grunt work? in preparing bishops? appointments is generally performed by the nuncio, or papal ambassador, in a given country. Putting someone with a Holy Office background in role would solidify a tendency to value clarity over diplomatic skill in grooming prospective bishops.

Third, naming Pell to head the Congregation for Bishops would also mean another non-Italian, and another English-speaker, in a key leadership role. It would leave Amato as the lone Italian prefect of a congregation in Benedict?s Vatican, and would also mean that English-speakers hold two of the three Vatican jobs traditionally regarded as most powerful after the papacy itself.

Especially at a time when the role of the Vatican and of bishops around the world is under fire in the English-speaking world because of the sexual abuse crisis, that might be considered an advantage. Notably, the question of accountability for bishops who mismanaged the crisis ? and of crafting new accountability measures to ensure that such mistakes don?t happen again ? falls into the bailiwick of the Congregation for Bishops.

Fourth, naming Pell could also be a minor victory for transparency and openness in the Vatican. Over his long career, Pell has long been a media favorite because he always makes himself available to journalists and speaks his mind. One can agree or disagree with what he?s got to say, but his fearlessness and candor are nonetheless somewhat rare commodities at senior levels of the church.

The Congregation for Bishops has long been one of the most difficult Vatican offices to penetrate, in part because the nomination of bishops is a confidential process. If he gets the job, Pell certainly won?t be floating key appointments in advance, but he may be able to shed some light on how the process works ? who?s involved, what difference the various forms of input collected as part of the process actually make, and which issues are driving selections in various parts of the world. All by itself, that could be a great contribution to better public understanding of the Vatican and the church.

Finally, on the subject of rumors involving Pell, the Archdiocese of Sydney has denied reports that he might be named Pope Benedict?s apostolic visitor in Ireland. (In his pastoral letter to Ireland in February, Benedict pledged to launch an apostolic visitation.) A May 8 statement from the archdiocese also defended Pell?s record on the sexual abuse crisis, asserting that when he was in Melbourne he was among the first bishops in the world to launch an independent commission to review sex abuse cases. During his five years in Melbourne, the statement said, Pell permanently removed twenty abuser priests from ministry.

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