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Auxiliary bishops frozen in place

Richard McBrien | Aug. 2, 2010 Essays in Theology

It was recently announced that Pope Benedict XVI has accepted the resignation of my friend Peter Rosazza as auxiliary bishop of my home Archdiocese of Hartford, having reached the retirement age of 75.

The announcement served as a reminder of the auxiliary bishops, most of whom were appointed by Pope Paul VI while Archbishop Jean Jadot served as Apostolic Delegate to the United States (1974-80), who were frozen in place after Jadot's resignation was quickly accepted by Pope John Paul II in June of 1980.

By "frozen in place," I mean that, unlike many other auxiliary bishops in the John Paul II era, they were never appointed to head a diocese of their own. They retired and, in some cases, died as auxiliary bishops.

This is yet another aspect of the dramatic change in the composition of the U.S. hierarchy under the previous pope and now also under his successor, Benedict XVI, who came into the papacy soon after the death of John Paul II in April, 2005.

(For my earlier column on this subject, see "U.S. bishops from a better time [1]")

This week's column, like the one on diocesan bishops of the past, may include names whom some readers are convinced should *not* be on the list, while there may be other names whom some readers are convinced *should* be on the list.

As in the earlier column, the names of the auxiliary bishops are given in the alphabetical order of the dioceses in which they served. There are 10 in all.

Francis Murphy was appointed auxiliary bishop of the Baltimore archdiocese under Archbishop William Borders in 1976, Borders having succeeded Cardinal Lawrence Shehan in 1974. It was the death of Borders at age 96 that provided the catalyst for my earlier column on the good-to-outstanding bishops of the 1960s and 1970s, under Popes John XXIII and Paul VI.

Murphy died of cancer at the relatively young age of 66, after having served as vicar general of the archdiocese, being directly involved in interfaith dialogue, and being an active presence in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, especially among its younger members.

Joseph Sullivan is one of two exceptions on this list of 10 auxiliary bishops. He was appointed auxiliary bishop of Brooklyn under Bishop Francis Mugavero less than four months after Jadot was relieved of his duties as apostolic delegate.

Sullivan was a nationally recognized leader in Catholic social services and headed Catholic Charities in Brooklyn

Thomas Gumbleton was appointed auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Detroit in 1968 under Cardinal John

Dearden, served as vicar general of the archdiocese, and became a national figure in founding Pax Christi, and in supporting women's ordination and gay rights.

Joseph Schoenherr was also appointed an auxiliary bishop of Detroit in 1968. He died in 2007.

Robert Morneau was appointed auxiliary bishop of Green Bay in 1978 under Bishop Aloysius Wycislo and has distinguished himself with his many writings and lectures on spirituality.

Peter Rosazza was named auxiliary bishop of the Hartford archdiocese under Archbishop John Whealon in 1978, headed the apostolate to the Spanish-speaking, and was one of the five bishops who drafted the pastoral letter on the U.S. economy in 1986.

George Wirz was appointed auxiliary bishop of Madison under Bishop Cletus O'Donnell in 1977 and was described by one local newspaper as "one of the most beloved priests" in the diocese.

Richard Sklba was appointed auxiliary bishop of Milwaukee under Archbishop Rembert Weakland in 1979, but the two men had to go to Rome to plead Sklba's case because he had been a member of the Catholic Biblical Association committee that reported to Pope Paul VI in 1976 that there is nothing in the New Testament to prevent the Church from ordaining women to the priesthood.

Emil Wcela was appointed auxiliary bishop of Rockville Centre, N.Y., under Bishop John McGann in 1988. Like Sklba, Wcela is a biblical scholar.

And, finally, Thomas Costello was appointed auxiliary bishop of Syracuse under Bishop Frank Harrison in 1978. He, too, was exceedingly popular in his diocese.

The U.S. hierarchy and the church it serves would have been enriched if these auxiliary bishops had been given dioceses of their own.

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Another friend of mine died in early July at age 91. Fr. Joseph Murphy never became a bishop, but he was one of the finest and most respected priests in the Hartford archdiocese. May his name long be remembered and his ministry cherished as a model for priests everywhere.

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