

Q & A: Rocco Palmo

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 27, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Usually at Q & A, I email one question to five different people, soliciting their replies. This week, to change things up a bit, I emailed five questions to the same person, blogger extraordinaire Rocco Palmo, whose blog [Whispers in the Loggia](#) [1] has become a must-read for Catholics.

I first heard of Rocco on a trip to Rome many years ago, when there was speculation his was a pen name for a retired and particularly well-connected Vatican Monsignor. I returned to the States, sent an email, and found he was a then-twenty-three year old living in Philly. I drove up I-95 the next day to meet him and have been reading and chatting and emailing ever since. I hope the readers will enjoy his commentary on the state of the Church.

First question: Do you perceive a central characteristic among Benedict 16th's appointments to the hierarchy?

Rocco Palmo: In every pontificate, any credible analysis of the episcopacy has to view it in two parts: the bishops a pope inherits from his predecessor, and the "new breed" he adds to their number. As the US church hasn't seen in living memory, Benedict XVI's meticulous scrutiny with the case-files has yielded a historically pointed divide between the two, producing a commentary on the status quo that's as evident as the shift away from it has been relatively smooth, even if its effect will only fully emerge less in days than decades.

Despite the sea-change, in many quarters the perception remains that a typical appointee in the US has little more than the proverbial "six months in a parish" under his belt. While that model -- which placed a greater premium on a cleric's administrative gifts than his pastoral ability (and, as a result, saw the de facto pattern of a "career path" to the high-hat rooted in chancery work) -- has largely been the American church's prevailing one for most of the last century, it's become little more than myth as the last five years of nods have seen its astonishing, near complete demise.

In its place, the freshly-operative norm for first-time appointees has overwhelmingly veered toward the selection of priests whose CVs have racked up far closer to "six months in the office," the bulk of their ministries instead spent in the trenches of education and parish life, immersed in the concrete, anything-but-ideological reality of the gifts, challenges and concerns of the church on the ground -- and above all, picks with the instinctive, proven ability to take all comers, bring out the best in every side and keep things united and moving... just like a parish. In a nutshell, these days you'll find far more appointees pastoring multiple churches at once than the most common of duties on their predecessors' bios: that is, "chancellor," "vicar-general" and the like.

For all the criticism Rome has taken on the sex-abuse crisis, this upending of things at the top evinces a storyline many will find refreshing, even pleasantly shocking: a whole new ballgame engineered by the Vatican, a concerted reboot drawn from the keen, mostly-unsung recognition in its halls that the managerial mindset which birthed the scandals has seen its day and earned its replacement. In response, the concept is being implemented the only way such a transition can take place to its fullest effect in an apparatus like ours: a systematic evolution -- diocese by diocese, appointment by appointment.

To be sure, the necessarily incremental rollout of such a strategy won't satisfy the internet age's all-consuming lust for sweeping change, facile, agenda-based interpretations, or blaring headlines. Then again, Joseph Ratzinger's never been one for playing to the short-term gaggle of insta-analysis -- as we saw with last week's British tour, this pope is well attuned to how quickly opinion can turn.

On the pope's preferred turf of history's long march, however, the ongoing remaking of the ranks could end up becoming the most significant shake-up of the American episcopate since the 1830s and '40s, when a young church ravaged and weakened by the brutal trusteeism scandals received its first wave of Irish-born prelates armed with a mandate to build strong, clerically-dominated central structures to:

1. Efficiently organize the church's growth, and
2. Ensure that no one could be mistaken about who was completely in charge.

As the decades-long trail of decisions that erupted in 2002 revealed the same pinnacle of excess on the chancery side that parish-seizing, control-driven laity wrought in the 1820s, the pendulum has shifted decisively away from the long-default 'Irish model' template -- and given the short space of time, the result it portends is all the more more dramatic.

With today's 'baby bishops' almost invariably aged between 45 and 55 at the time of their appointments and just settling into the corner offices, we've got another quarter-century or longer to fully see how their ministries fully shake out, so further examination will have to wait. In the meantime, though, a couple added things bear noting.

First, while this quick glance has mostly dealt with the priests B16 has elevated since his election, the pontiff's push for pastors clearly extends beyond first-time appointees to those he's inherited and moved up the hierarchical chain. For proof of this, one need look no further than the two Stateside archbishops Benedict has, so far, elevated to the College of Cardinals -- Boston's Séan O'Malley, the 'founding pastor' of Washington's Hispanic community for over a decade before his appointment to the Virgin Islands, and Houston's Dan DiNardo, whose last seven years before the mitre were spent starting a parish in Pittsburgh's far suburbs, its first worship/office/meeting and religious ed. space comprising all of two rooms in an office park basement.

Likely to join them in time is another celebrated community-builder: Miami's first ever native-son archbishop, Tom Wenski, whose early priesthood saw him found a parish for the city's Haitian community and lead it for 18 years -- an experience that still usually finds him murmuring the offertory prayers from memory in Creole, whatever language the congregation before him might speak.

This leads to a second point. Not all that long ago, no shortage of active prelates remained who, being of the old school, hadn't fully grasped the sudden emergence of Hispanics in massive numbers -- because, so the line went, the latter wasn't noticable 'on the books.' Yet as a pastor would easily recognize, a sizable chunk of Latinos -- especially in areas where the community is freshly-arrived -- don't register in parishes; for one, the Anglo-church fixation on paper and programs has never been a hallmark of Catholicism south of the border, and among the undocumented, a lingering reluctance toward registration remains.

Either way, the still far-too-discounted reality is that, already -- at least, by the USCCB's count -- an ever-growing majority of American Catholics under 25 are Hispanic. As a result, a prospective candidate unable to, at the very least, engage and integrate the most crucial bloc to the church's future on these shores probably won't end up making the cut anymore, at least across broad swaths of the national map.

On the flip-side, Benedict's scouting has yielded another under-noted trend: the birth of the 'crossover'

bishop -- an American-born, Hispanic-bred prelate native to both sides of the cultural divide and, above all, able to unite the two. To a degree, the pope's had the benefit of timing on this one; only now is the rise of bishops like Brownsville's Daniel Flores, Austin's Joe Vasquez of Austin and Sacramento's Jaime Soto bringing to full flower a decades-back push that saw Latino seminarians placed on the long-established leadership track (Roman training, advanced studies, top chancery posts, etc.). Still, what's significant here is the staggering speed with which they've been sent upward -- each the youngest member of the bench when they were named auxiliaries (44 at the oldest), the trio have since received key postings as diocesan bishops, two of them now in the capitals of the twin largest states.

While such a scenario would've seemed far-fetched to many not all that long ago, the third of the above might just be the most notable of all: when Flores was named to the booming, million-member diocese encompassing the Rio Grande Valley last December at all of 48, it proved a watershed. No cleric of Latin roots had ever been tapped to lead a Stateside see of a million Catholics or more... and the last time any American bishop under 50 took the reins of a church of said size came in 1985, when, five months shy of the half-century mark, Roger Mahony was sent home to Los Angeles.

As game-changing company goes, that's pretty tough to top.

Lastly, while this pontificate's chosen crop is far less dominated by the church's traditional "management" class, it might just come all the more prepared for objectively top-shelf leadership. Because what the new breed lacks in its reliance exclusively upon the Roman universities, it more than makes up for not just in the thick of pastoral service, but in its considerable cred with the most vaunted training-grounds of the society in which it serves.

Especially these days, no bishop can even think of ruling by edict, and effective leadership and credible persuasion have ever more become the measure of one's ministry. And, almost as if to indicate the degree to which Rome "gets" that, seemingly as never before, the Professor Pope has shown a distinct penchant for launching Ivy Leaguers onto the bench -- Bishop Bernie Hebda of Gaylord earned his BA from Harvard and a degree from Columbia Law; both Soto and Twin Cities' auxiliary Lee Piché likewise picked up graduate degrees in Morningside Heights; Allentown's John Barres got his bachelor's at Princeton before scoring an MBA from NYU; the freshly-ordained auxiliary of San Francisco, Bishop Robert McElroy, spent his undergrad days in Cambridge, then went on for a Master's and Doctorate from the "Western Ivy" of Stanford, another of whose alums, Bishop Cirilo Flores -- a Law grad before he entered seminary -- was named an auxiliary of Orange last year.

As education and experience ad extra goes among Benedict's picks, that's just scratching the surface: born a Lutheran, Bishop Paul Swain of Sioux Falls was General Counsel to the governor of Wisconsin before entering the church and ditching the Capitol for the Cathedral, Bishop Tim Doherty of Lafayette in Indiana earned a doctorate in health-care ethics from Loyola University in Chicago between stints as a highly-regarded pastor of four parishes while, as a priest of New Orleans, Bishop Roger Morin of Biloxi (currently doing double-duty as lead hand for the besieged Catholic Campaign for Human Development) served as a special assistant to the Crescent City's mayor for Federal programs, in a unique arrangement that saw him paid \$1 a year. (For good measure, Morin's predecessor along the Gulf Coast, Archbishop Tom Rodi -- sent to Mobile in 2007 -- earned his pre-divinity degrees from Georgetown and Tulane Law.)

Shortly after becoming Benedict's hand-picked representative to the States in 2006, the story goes that, behind closed doors, Archbishop Pietro Sambi bluntly put the bishops on notice that, in as many words, "your successors will not look like yourselves."

Barely a half-decade into the reign of Ratzinger, the ground-shift might remain in its early stages. Even so, ?mission accomplished? would hardly be a premature assessment.

Source URL (retrieved on 07/29/2017 - 06:46): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/q-rocco-palmo-0>

Links:

[1] <http://whispersintheloggia.blogspot.com/>