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Q & A: Rocco Palmo

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Distinctly Catholic

This week, Rocco Palmo is sharing the ecclesiastical version of a State of the Union address with us here at Q & A. Today he looks at the much-rumored forthcoming consistory.

The question: According to some reports, Pope Benedict is preparing to name new cardinals, possibly as soon as next month. What can we expect in the College's next class?

Rocco Palmo: I'd normally be reluctant to compare people to bulls... but there's something about that scarlet that really drives folks wild -- and not just in the the church. Indeed, a friend once mused that if Martians ever descended, not knowing our languages, customs, anything about us, even they'd be able to quickly tell the difference between a bishop and a cardinal because of how everybody just seems to charge toward anyone wearing the rank's distinctive color, and what it represents.

Thanks to that, consistory time -- or, as my readers have come to know it, "Red Dawn" -- has a particular magic to it, and one I'm especially fond of. To cite just one example, when Texas got its first cardinal at the last intake in late 2007, the horde of pilgrims who descended wildly on Rome provided the Eternal City's first mass-taste of Catholicism in the American South, and the group's typically-Texan buoyancy served to considerably brighten the impressions of many Vatican folk on the state of the US church after the scandals. On his return, Dan DiNardo was suddenly thrust into the top rank of the city's (and the Lone Star State's) civic leadership, and above all, I remember hearing that at least some local parishes suddenly found themselves deluged with calls from people who'd become curious about the church thanks to the wall-to-wall media coverage, looking to learn even more. As good times go, especially these days, you can't really ask for more than that.

More broadly, though, the week of celebrations highlights the universality and spirit of the faith at its best -- Vietnamese and Mexicans dancing in St Peter's Square, Italians kicking (and Spaniards pushing)

their way through the crowds to the customary receptions, Americans given a fresh sense of faith and perspective at taking in a living history far longer than anything we have... all in all, one big happy family -- even if the period inevitably leads to considering what the mainstream press have come to term the PDE: that is, the "papal death event."

As of this writing, Benedict XVI has 17 open seats in the college that'll elect his successor, with two more cardinals reaching the age of 80 -- and, ergo, becoming ineligible to enter a hypothetical conclave -- by 14 November. So that makes nineteen slots to return to the maximum 120 (a number set by Paul VI in 1975). Already, in the red hats he doled out in March 2006 and November 2007, the pontiff has named thirty -- that is, a quarter -- of his successor's eventual electorate, so restoring the "papal senate" to its full voting complement would give Papa Ratzinger 42% of "his" cardinals in the electoral college, the rest named by John Paul II.

But here's where it really gets interesting. Between now and the end of 2012, at least an additional 23 seats will open up just on account of electors "aging out" at 80. So, within just seven years of his own election, B16 will have the ability to single-handedly create not just a majority of the voting college, but a contingent just shy of the two-thirds necessary to elect the next pope. What's more, while John Paul II -- who repeatedly broke with Paul's 120 limit, once ballooning it as high as 135 -- tended to name his cardinals significantly older, especially toward the end of his reign, as of today Benedict's contributions to the scarlet tide have an average age just over 68, and that figure's bound to fall considerably once the new class takes its seats. Lastly, this rapid turnover of the college presents the specter of a scenario that could end up being quite a pointed last word on John Paul's legacy: the possibility that one of Karol Wojtyla's chosen cardinals will never don the papal white. (A month after becoming archbishop of Munich, Joseph Ratzinger was elevated by Paul VI at his last consistory in 1977 -- only one other Montini red hat voted in the 2005 conclave.)

All this is of especially crucial importance for the Stateside church: of the cardinals turning 80 within the next two years, no less than six -- almost half of the 13 electors the US started 2010 with -- are ours, four of whom will either "age out" over the next year or have since this one's start. For American Catholicism, a glut of impending openings of this sort is without any precedent. And just as he has with his appointments of bishops, Benedict is playing a conspicuous game of long ball here -- of the two residential prelates he's already elevated here, Boston's Sean O'Malley is 66, DiNardo all of 61; upon their elevations, each became the youngest cardinal named on these shores since LA's Roger Mahony received the red biretta at 55 in 1991. While we're at it, one would be wise to recall the relative youth of those who the pontiff's placed in the pipeline to fill those rapidly-opening seats -- Mahony's successor-in-waiting, Archbishop José Gomez, is 58; New York's Archbishop Timothy Dolan is 60, and the coming go-round's most bankable American pick, the Vatican's "chief justice" Archbishop Raymond Burke, is 62. In other words, they won't just be around to elect Benedict's successor, but maybe even his successor's successor, to say nothing of the impact they'll respectively have over nearly two decades among the nation's topmost church leadership.

At the same time, the pontiff's already begun to undertake another kind of domestic shake-up: shifting the distribution of the US' red hats -- a strategy intended both to more accurately reflect the drastically-altered demographic spread of the nation's 68 million Catholics, and to reward the "growth and dynamism" of its new outposts. Before DiNardo's elevation, the last time an American city saw its first cardinal came in 1967, when Washington -- still freshly spun off from the Premier See of Baltimore -- celebrated the elevation of Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle. Before that, you'd have to go back to 1953, when the New York-born archbishop of Los Angeles, James McIntyre, became the nation's first Roman prince west of St Louis.

While the gameplan began in Texas, the coming churn is, in time, practically certain to make more red-hat history in the South -- most likely to the Harley-riding, cigar-chomping, hyper-competent and ever-colorful native son now heading the 1.3 million-member Miami church, Archbishop Thomas Wenski, or to Atlanta (now home to a million Catholics) and Archbishop Wilton Gregory, the much-acclaimed, almost providential USCCB president in the opening throes of the sex-abuse crisis, and a figure said to enjoy the pontiff's particular high regard. And maybe even both. As a bonus, just as Gomez's certain red hat will mark the rise of the first Hispanic cardinal in the States, elevating Gregory -- an especially beloved figure among the progressive crowd -- would see no less a watershed moment: an African-American prince of the church.

(While we're at it, it's worth adding that, between Wenski's handy sound-byte sum-up of Catholic social teaching -- namely, "No man is a problem" -- and Gomez's bilingual Installation Day message that "no one is a stranger for [God] and no one is an alien for any of us," thanks to Benedict, the migrant to these shores, irrespective of legal status, hasn't had such faithful, forceful and high-ranking friends placed atop the US ranks since Mahony himself; in a press conference on his appointment, the pontiff's Miami pick -- who, even before his installation, likewise urged Florida Gov. Charlie Crist to sign a (subsequently vetoed) bill that would've mandated ultrasounds for women considering abortion -- memorably compared the illegality of undocumented immigration to getting "a parking ticket.")

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All that said, let's take a look beyond these shores and toward the class whose ascent is, so they say, just ahead.

Above all else, the next consistory will almost certainly bring something I've been chomping at the bit about for some time: the day when TC makes TC -- that is, the day when, at long last, Archbishop Thomas Collins of Toronto enters The College.

In a nutshell, Collins is one of the most prayerful, unpretentious, generous, happy and holy prelates I've ever been blessed to know... and, truth be told, I've known him since I was a kid. That he's gone on to lead Canada's largest and most diverse local church -- its Catholic population quickly approaching 2 million -- never ceases to be astonishing, simply because he's remained his priceless, earthy, clear and charitable self throughout. Case in point: you're as likely to find him alone, queued up for a coffee and donut on a run to one of downtown TO's numerous Tim Hortons' stands -- "St Timothy's," to the archbishop -- as you would in the sanctuary of St Michael's Cathedral. When I simply mentioned the red hat to him on a Sunday evening we spent catching up over the summer -- the beginning of a week in Toronto when, among other talks, he asked me to speak with his priests on the importance of technology in ministry -- Collins' face turned even more scarlet than the biretta he'll soon receive, less out of anticipation than a seeming sense of dread.

A Scripture scholar, longtime seminary formator, cat lover and committed technophile, the "hard-charging" 63 year-old prelate is a refreshing antidote to the frequent griping over the alleged "anti-Catholicism" of media one tends to hear from senior prelates, especially whenever a scandal's afoot. As the global press bore down on the Vatican over the European revelations during Holy Week, Collins issued a markedly different message than the many American bishops who slammed what they saw as a battering of the church, telling his Chrism Mass crowd in the cathedral that, if anything, "we should be grateful for the attention which the media devotes to the sins of Catholic clergy, even if constant repetition may give the false impression that Catholic clergy are particularly sinful.

As opposed to scandal-mongering, he added, "that attention is a profound tribute to the priesthood" as "people instinctively expect holiness in a Catholic priest, and are especially appalled when he does evil." While the natives were declaring war on The New York Times -- and the paper ferociously blasted right back -- the Grey Lady's op-ed columnist Ross Douthat saw fit to highlight Collins as a "bishop who gets it." Especially these days, high praise, indeed.

Across the Pond, meanwhile, another global star of the next class presents itself in the person of Joseph Ratzinger's hand-picked successor in Bavaria's top post: the archbishop of Munich and Freising, 57 year-old Reinhard Marx.

As the abuse crisis' most recent turn erupted in Germany earlier this year -- its impact said to have taken a particular toll on the pope -- Marx slipped away from home in early April to make his first major US appearance, delivering a well-received lecture at Notre Dame on "The Social Message of the Church in the Context of Contemporary Challenges."

A trained sociologist and long the German bishops' lead hand on issues of work and the economy, in late 2008 the motorbike-loving, "larger-than-life" Munich prelate -- said to have been part of his predecessor's drafting committee for what would become B16's social teaching manifesto, Caritas in Veritate -- published a book-length response to Karl Marx's Das Kapital, today's Marx subtitled his rebuttal "A Plea for Man."

The country that, with the US, underwrites the Vatican budget more than any other, not since 2001 has the head of a German diocese been elevated to the Pope's senate. Beyond his age, Marx's mind, savvy -- and Benedict's clear über-favor -- make him a figure to watch far beyond the bounds of the pontiff's cherished homeland.

And lastly, the coming consistory will reportedly see B16 go a ways toward remedying one of his early pontificate's glaring oversights -- the number of cardinal-electors given to the church's ever-booming contingents in Africa and Asia. Between the two continents (now home to a combined 270 million Catholics, over a quarter of the world total), the pope bestowed only a combined five red hats in his first two editions of the biglietto -- the document that literally comprises one's "ticket" to the College -- and this time around could see the figure double.

So the early line says, among several other likelies from the developing church are the archbishops of Tokyo, Yaoundé, and Kampala, a first-ever Myanmar in Rangon's Salesian Archbishop Charles Maung Bo, and the head of Africa's largest diocese -- Archbishop Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya of Kinshasa, named by Benedict to lead the 4 million-member church in 2008, while the 70 year-old prelate was serving as an international co-president of Pax Christi. Even for these, however, one figure particularly stands out, for reasons that speak to both sides of the global north's ecclesial divide.

Widely anticipated to be among the cardinals-designate is the first cardinal Sri Lanka would be able to claim in almost half a century: the 62 year-old archbishop of Colombo, Malcolm Ranjith. More astute readers might've heard his name before; after one tour of Roman duty -- a four-year stint at the Vatican office overseeing the missions that saw him exiled after reported clashes with one of the "sacred palaces'" quintessential old-guard players, Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe (himself banished by Benedict to Naples in 2006), within months of his election the pope returned Ranjith to the Holy See, naming him #2 of the global church's top liturgy office, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

During his time between Vatican tours, Ranjith served as nuncio to Indonesia -- the world's largest Muslim country -- giving him a useful immersion in Islamic society. Back at the Home Office,

meanwhile, the archbishop likely stirred up more flack among the Curial establishment thanks to his staunch support for Summorum Pontificum, Benedict's landmark 2007 "liberation" of the Tridentine Mass. Either way, the pontiff's dispatching Ranjith back home saw the native son re-immense himself in peace and justice work; as a young auxiliary in the capital, the prodigal archbishop was named a government mediator between the factions in Sri Lanka's decades-long civil war, and on his return, one local wag went so far as to call him "an outrageous supporter of cease-fire." On the wider scene, however, on what's become Catholicism's global frontier, no Asian prelate -- perhaps no African, either -- enjoys Benedict's favor and closeness more, so for those keeping score at home, remember Colombo as a "secret weapon" in Papa Ratz's arsenal.

Back home, meanwhile, the two American archbishops most likely to see red at the new intake are the aforementioned, ever-controversial Burke -- whose pointed jabs at President Obama have reportedly seen at least one diplomatic complaint made by the administration -- and the ever-delicate theologian archbishop of the nation's capital, Washington's Donald Wuerl.

As dynamic duos go, the two more than hold their own; on his arrival as archbishop of St Louis in early 2004, the Wisconsin-born master canonist sparked an enduring national tempest when he famously told an interviewer that he "would have to admonish" the eventual Democratic nominee, Senator John Kerry, "not to present himself for Communion" given Kerry's pro-choice stance on abortion. In response, the meticulous Wuerl -- then bishop of his native Pittsburgh -- led the pushback, writing in an essay that while "one may well understand the national implications on the part of any diocesan bishop who would rightfully wish to make declarations" on a politico's fitness to receive the Eucharist in light of public stances that skirt church teaching, the "national ramifications" of any one bishop's judgment demanded a more collegial response.

After Burke's transfer to Rome, the spat flared again early last year as, in a video interview with the prominent anti-abortion activist Randall Terry, the freshly-named top jurist said that church law "puts the burden upon the minister of Holy Communion" to deny the host to "someone who in any way contributes in an active way to the murder of innocent defenseless infants in the womb."

"The Canon is completely clear," Burke said. "It is not subject in my judgment to any other interpretations."

Within 24 hours, Burke issued a statement apologizing for the "confusion and hurt" his remarks caused, adding that he was speaking in a personal capacity and, above all, did not realize that the interview "would be used as part of a campaign of severe criticism of certain fellow bishops." Even so, Wuerl responded in an unusually high-profile manner, telling PoliticsDaily's Melinda Henneberger that "I stand with the great majority of American bishops and bishops around the world in saying this canon was never intended to be used this way," adding for good measure that he had "yet to see where the canonical approach has changed anyone's heart."

The Communion Wars made for but the latest instance of a colorful history, one which goes back some two decades. Provided they both make the biglietto, however, Elevation Day will inevitably unite the two for a priceless moment.

Once the Pope places the red hat on the heads of his picks, each new cardinal wends his way around the ranks of the College to exchange the sign of peace with his confreres.

When Wuerl reaches Burke, just remember to take in the scene... and see it as yet another example of every Consistory Week's great lesson -- that the church is far bigger than any one of us.

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