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In two key appointments, Benedict opts for insiders

by John L. Allen Jr.

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In two key personnel moves announced today, Pope Benedict XVI has turned to veteran Vatican insiders, naming Archbishop Mauro Piacenza, a 66-year-old Italian, as the new Prefect of the Congregation for Clergy, and Robert Sarah of Guinea, 65, as the new President of the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*.

Both men are no strangers to the Roman scene.

Piacenza has been in the Vatican since 1990, most recently serving as the secretary of the Congregation for Clergy, which oversees affairs relating to diocesan priests. Sarah has been in Rome since October 2001, working as the secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

It's rare for the number two official in a Vatican office to be named the head of that same office, but Benedict's decision to tap Piacenza to take over the Congregation for Clergy is widely seen as a reward for his efforts in organizing the recently-concluded *Year of Priests*.

Cor Unum, where Sarah takes over, is the Vatican office which oversees the various Catholic charitable organizations and movements around the world.

Sarah, who served as Archbishop of Conakry in Guinea from 1979 to 2001, is the second African appointed to head a Vatican office by Benedict XVI, after Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana was tapped as President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 2009. In effect, Africans now hold two of the Vatican's most important decision-making roles in terms of the application of Catholic social teaching in both global policy and humanitarian efforts.

Both Piacenza and Sarah could be in line to be named cardinals in a consistory Benedict XVI is expected to call for late November. Announcement of the names of new cardinals is expected one month before,

probably after the conclusion of the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East.

In political terms, both Piacenza and Sarah would generally be seen as ?conservatives.?

Piacenza hails from Genoa, where early on he was a student of Cardinal Giuseppe Siri, who was the strong conservative candidate to become pope in four conclaves (1958, 1963, and twice in 1978). Italian journalist Benny Lai once dubbed him the ?pope who was never elected.? Some tiny sedevacantist groups actually have been known as ?Sirianists,? because they regarded Siri as the legitimate pope instead of John XXIII or Paul VI.

Over the years, Piacenza has been known inside the Vatican as a can-do pragmatist, though also a man of tradition.

Sarah is typically seen as a member of the more conservative wing of the African hierarchy. During the 2009 Synod for Africa, Sarah gave one of the strongest speeches denouncing the importation into Africa of a Western ?theory of gender,? which he warned could distort the traditional family structure and promote practices at odds with traditional African sexual morality.

Two other points are worth making about today?s appointments.

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First, the elevation of Piacenza is to some extent also a papal vote of confidence in his top aide, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State. Bertone is also from Genoa, and he helped ordain Piacenza to the episcopacy in 2003 when Piacenza was tapped to head the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Goods of the Church.

Bertone tends to draw mixed reviews, as some fault him for a perceived ?crisis of governance? under Benedict XVI. Yet the pope has repeatedly signaled his support of Bertone, and the Piacenza nomination also moves in that direction.

Second, today?s nominations also seem to confirm that any hypothetical ?shake-up? of the Roman Curia under Benedict XVI is unlikely to happen.

Recently the pope seemed poised to name Cardinal George Pell of Australia to head the Congregation for Bishops, a flamboyant personality who would have, to some extent, broken the mold of quiet, behind-the-scenes Vatican officials. At the last minute, the nod went instead to Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Quebec, a ?Ratzingerian? intellectual with long experience of Rome as a professor at the Lateran University and as secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christianity Unity.

The choice of two curial veterans this morning to take over two other offices indicates that at least to some extent, the pope has opted for continuity in administering the church?s central government.

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