

What happened in Baltimore

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 17, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

ANALYSIS

Back in the day, the apostolic nuncio, then-Archbishop Pio Laghi, who was determined to re-make the hierarchy in a more conservative fashion, would say about his episcopal appointments, "One for us, one for them." By "us" he meant men like Cardinal Bernard Francis Law, and by "them" he meant men in the mold of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. Laghi's method had one undeniably unfortunate consequence: He bequeathed a bishops' conference that is very, although not deeply, divided.

None of the U.S. bishops are "liberal" in the way a secular politician would be liberal and none of them are "conservative" the way a secular politician would be conservative. We are stuck with these terms, and they are useful as shorthand, but we must admit the way they confine and distort. The differences within the conference are not deep because all of the bishops agree on the articles of the Creed, all are staunchly pro-life, all are committed to social justice for the poor, etc. Additionally, the group is remarkably homogeneous in terms of life experience: All attended seminaries and studied theology, most worked in chanceries or taught in seminaries, all wear the same clothes and read the same magazines and tell the same jokes. The differences among them exhibit the narcissism of small differences, but such narcissism is one of the best evidences for Original Sin. Wars are as often ignited by little things as by big things.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York's election to the presidency of the USCCB has been called "explosive," "unprecedented," and "an earthquake." Of course, on the news ticker it came after the engagement of Prince William, but this is the world in which we live. What are we to make of this "unprecedented" event?

First, the vote for Dolan was an endorsement of the kind of forceful, high-profile leadership the bishops felt they received from outgoing USCCB President Cardinal George. But, as a staffer at the USCCB told me over a year ago, Cardinal George's success as President stemmed from the fact that he was trusted by the entire conference, he listened to all, and could cobble together documents with which everyone could feel satisfied and no one could feel like they had "lost." Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson would undoubtedly have kept a lower-profile than George, but it is also doubtful he could have achieved the consensus the George achieved. So, more important than being forceful, the vote for Dolan was a vote for someone who can keep the bishops together, which is, after all, the central task of the group's officers. Kicanas was not trusted by some conservative bishops but everyone trusts Dolan.


Second, the Bernardin bishops have lost the swing voters, perhaps irrevocably. Bishops do not often violate a precedent, and no one wanted to "humiliate" Bishop Kicanas, as one staffer characterized his defeat. But, I heard from several bishops that they did not like feeling their hands had been tied three years prior. Each year, the Vatican appoints about a dozen new bishops, so more than thirty of the men in the room yesterday had not been in the room when Dolan lost the vice-presidency to Kicanas three years ago by a single vote. Why should their hands be tied by precedent? Add to this the personal affection many of the younger bishops have for Dolan, whom many knew as seminary rector in Rome, and the swing vote was willing to break with tradition and skip over Kicanas.

All the bishops I spoke to agreed that there had been a lot of politicking but the nature of that politicking reveals why liberals should not be so disheartened and conservatives should be a little less celebratory this morning. It is not healthy for there to exist for all ages a "Bernardin clique" and a "Laghi clique." Indeed, it is not healthy for there to be cliques at all, but again, human nature being what it is, they are not going anywhere. But, Dolan is, like Cardinal George, *sui generis*. He certainly received the support of the Laghi bishops but he enjoys an independent stature as well on account of his years in Rome, his winning personality, his media savvy, etc. Cardinal George, too, was no mere leader of a clique, catapulted from Yakima to Portland to Chicago in record time not on account of his episcopal politicking but because of his extraordinary theological mind and his connection with the *Communio* school of theology that was, and is, at the heart of many of Pope John Paul II's and Pope Benedict's appointments. Think Scola in Venice, Ouellet at the Congregation for Bishops, Caffarra in Bologna, Gonzalez in San Juan. Both Archbishop Dolan and Cardinal George are more than the candidate of a faction and that, ultimately, was what decided this race. Had the bishops selected Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, that would have been an indication that the Bernardin v. Laghi struggle would be on-going. Dolan's job in the next three years is to help the body of bishops transcend that legacy of division, a task which is at the top of the nuncio's to-do list as well.

There is one other aspect of the story that I alluded to yesterday and which was confirmed for me by several bishops. The attacks on Bishop Kicanas in the last week before the election worked. These attacks focused on Kicanas' service as a seminary rector, when he recommended for orders a man who went on to be a child molester. Kicanas had answered the charges at the time and there was nothing to them, but on the eve of the election, when the CNN ticker had an item about "Top bishop denies promoting child molester," I knew there was trouble for Kicanas. Survivors' groups unwittingly did the bidding of the most conservative bishops by joining in the attacks. If that were not enough, the gay activists in the Rainbow Sash movement sealed Kicanas' fate when they "endorsed" him, a classic case of failing to anticipate the opposition. Still, I had anticipated there might be a sympathy backlash for Kicanas, not least because "whatever the bishops intended" some on the right now think they possess a "heckler's veto" over USCCB elections. Throw enough mud at the last minute, and they can stop someone they do not like from winning. They sent text messages to bishops. They called the bishops' rooms at the hotel. It was ugly. But, no bishop wanted to return to his diocese and be pummeled with questions about Kicanas' treatment of a sexual abuser. There was enough smoke to suggest a fire, and the bishops have no desire to be burned on that score anymore.

One other thing about the USCCB. Was anyone else surprised that the two candidates on the final possessed doctorates in educational psychology and church history, but not in theology? This, in the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI? Mind you, I will go with the church historian every time. Still, I kept looking around the room and wondering how many of the men gathered really grasped what Pope Benedict means when he talks about the New Evangelization.

So, that is my take on the election. I am a huge fan of Dolan's, which does not mean I agree with him on everything. But, his election is not, as has been suggested, a vote for culture war. His mission is to bring the USCCB together, to move past the divisions that exist. The closeness of the vote yesterday indicates how great a challenge he faces, but there are many ways to reach out and bring people together and he is a gifted and able leader.



For more coverage of Archbishop Timothy Dolan's election as head of the U.S. Bishops, see:

- Jerry Filteau's news story: [Spurning tradition, Bishops elect Dolan as new president](#) [1]
- Michael Sean Winters' analysis: [What happened in Baltimore](#) [2]
- Maureen Fiedler's take: [Does Dolan's election signify a Catholic 'Tea Party' movement?](#) [3]
- Ken Briggs' commentary: [Amidst Dolan hubbub, easy to forget bishops are virtually powerless](#) [4]

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