

Bertone's appointment puts the spotlight on Salesians; Salesians in the United States

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 29, 2006 All Things Catholic

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stubbornly resists what Shakespeare once called "the weak list of a country's fashion," but even so, the church too has its fads. One bit of ecclesiastical vogue these days might well be called "Salesian chic."

That reality was given a "slammer," as they say in the newspaper trade, last week by the appointment of Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone of Genoa, a Salesian, as the Vatican's Secretary of State.

The nomination was greeted as a revolution because Bertone is not a diplomat, yet one only has to reach back a couple of decades, to French Cardinal Jean Villot (1969 to 1979), for a precedent. To find the last Secretary of State who was a member of a religious order, on the other hand, one has to go all the way back to 1836 and Cardinal Luigi Lambruschini, a Barnabite. (Cardinal Anton Francesco Orioli, a Conventual Franciscan, held the post in 1848, but only *ad interim*).

Bertone thus becomes just the second religious to serve as Secretary of State, the Vatican's "Prime Minister," since the all-important office was created in 1644.

It's hardly an accident that the job went to a Salesian. In an era in which many of the great orders of the church have been rocked by internal ideological divisions, the Salesians are seen as robustly reliable -- not theological innovators, but down-to-earth pastors and educators, and generally with a good sense of humor.

"We're not complicated people," Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras, another Salesian in a high place, told *NCR* June 25. "Our spirit is family, especially with the young and the poor."

That profile has made them a "go-to" source for important leadership positions.

Depending on how one counts, the Salesians, with 16,682 priests and brothers worldwide, are either the second or third largest men's order in the church. (If you lump the various branches of the Franciscans together there are more than 30,000, but canonically that total is divided into

three distinct orders).

At the moment, the Salesians have more bishops than any other order in the church -- a total of 116, while their nearest competitor, the Order of Friars Minor, have 104, and the Jesuits 74. There are also seven Salesian cardinals, the second-highest total after the Jesuits, with 10.

Bertone is emblematic of the trend. His last Vatican job was as deputy to then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's doctrinal agency. When Bertone moved to Genoa in 2003, Ratzinger turned to another Salesian, Archbishop Angelo Amato, to fill Bertone's slot.

The only Nobel Prize winner in the Catholic episcopacy is a Salesian -- Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo of East Timor, who won the Peace Prize in 1996 along with José Ramos-Horta for their work for reconciliation.

In the Vatican, 15 Salesians hold policy-level positions, including three in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and 24 serve as consultants or members of Vatican academies and commissions. Since 1937, the Salesians have been entrusted with the Vatican's publishing operation, including administration of the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*.

When John Paul II in 2004 broke with centuries of taboo and named a woman to one of the *superiori* positions in the Vatican, he turned to a Salesian nun, Sr. Enrica Rosanna, as under-secretary in the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. When popes want to push the envelope, they generally reassure traditionalists by entrusting the assignment to someone with unimpeachable credentials -- and the fact that Rosanna is a Salesian did the trick.

That's the Salesian way.

"Don Bosco was a man of the church, and stressed to us to remain aligned with the church," said Fr. James Heuser, superior of the Eastern province of the Salesians in the United States.

Even when Don Bosco was barred for a time from hearing confessions by the archbishop of Turin, Heuser said, he insisted upon loyalty.

"It's in our spirit," he said.

None of this is to suggest the Salesians haven't produced firebrands. The former President of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, started off as a Salesian pastor in a Haitian slum, where he became an ardent disciple of liberation theology; and the leftist Italian theologian Giulio Girardi, who wrote books arguing that Marxism is another name for Christianity, was

also a Salesian priest.

Both men, however, were tossed out of the Salesians when they refused the directives of ecclesiastical authority.

To top it all off, in 2004 the Italian state television network, RAI, broadcast a two-part mini-drama based on the life of the Salesians' founder, the legendary 19th century Italian priest Don Bosco. Flavio Insinna, a leading Italian actor, played the title role, and the program drew impressive ratings.

Bertone's appointment thus puts the spotlight on an order destined to play an increasingly important role under Benedict XVI, and it's worth getting some sense of what their ascendancy may mean.

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The great orders have usually been born in response to some crisis -- the Franciscans, for example, to urbanization and the need to evangelize the cities; the Jesuits to the Reformation, and the need for a Catholic counter-offensive.

For the Salesians, it was the Industrial Revolution, especially the zones of despair, turmoil and revolution on the outskirts of the great industrial cities.

St. John Bosco (1815-1888), known affectionately as "Don Bosco," was shocked by the plight of the poor in Turin, especially the young -- the peddlers, shoe polishers, stable-boys, factory workers, vendors, and errand boys who formed the lowest cogs in the wheels of the new industrial machine.

Bosco became a tireless catechist among the young, hearing confessions, saying Masses, and organizing "oratories" where his boys could play, study and worship. He was also something of a labor organizer, negotiating contracts for young apprentices insisting that employers use them only in their acknowledged trade, that corporal punishment be abandoned, that proper wages be paid, rest periods be honored, and that decent sanitary conditions be maintained.

Thus the Salesian pastoral model was forged: solid, orthodox Catholic piety; an "in-the-trenches" commitment to the young, the poor, and to education; and a smiling closeness to the people, as opposed to the rather foreboding and aloof profile of the typical Italian *monsignore*. (In this sense, Bertone's penchant for hanging out with young people in Genoa's discos, and offering color commentary for soccer matches, is considered classic Salesian behavior).

"Don Bosco wanted us to be religious with our sleeves rolled up, not afraid of hard work," Heuser said, "whether it's in the confessional, in

the classroom, or on the soccer field."

Contrary to the peasant wisdom of "spare the rod, spoil the child," Bosco believed positive encouragement was a superior technique. He routinely spread around small presents, and led the young on outings to favorite spots around Turin. He called this approach the "preventive method," defining it this way: "As far as possible avoid punishing ? try to gain love before inspiring fear."

Bosco's work with disadvantaged youth, coupled with his broader commitment to a socially engaged Catholicism and his positive, world-friendly spirit, won him a wide international following. He was to some extent the Mother Teresa of his day. Shortly before Victor Hugo's death in 1883, even the legendary anti-clerical French writer asked to meet Bosco during a visit to Paris.

At the time of Don Bosco's death in 1888 there were 250 Salesian houses in the world, serving 130,000 children. Pius XI beatified Don Bosco in 1929, and canonized him in 1934.

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The lone Salesian bishop in the United States is Spanish-born Emilio Simeon Alluè, auxiliary of Boston, who spoke to *NCR* June 28 about the Bertone appointment and the Salesians' role in the church.

I asked Alluè if it's a point of pride for Salesians that one of their own now holds the Vatican's top job.

"By all means," he said. "We are all elated by this appointment, which confirms the trust that we Salesians have with the Holy Father. With past popes too, we've always enjoyed special confidence and trust."

Listening to Alluè, it's no mystery why popes like what they see.

"Don Bosco emphasized the sacramental life of the church, devotion to Mary, and loyalty to the Holy Father," he said. "That's the basis for our educational and pastoral approach. It sounds simple, but all our evangelizing effort leads to that."

"All our bishops and cardinals carry this [model] into their respective dioceses," he said. "We work hard to develop the faith and to be in union with the Holy Father."

Alluè said that Don Bosco's commitment to the young always had a

missionary dimension.

"From the very beginning, Don Bosco's idea was evangelizing, to teach the young and adults in order to evangelize," Alluè said. He pointed out that Bosco sent out his first missionaries to Argentina in 1875, with the aim of spreading the faith among indigenous groups in Patagonia, and that in short order the Salesians had missions spread all over the world.

Some have criticized the Bertone appointment because of his lack of a missionary background, but Alluè suggested that the missionary dimension of the Salesian experience could compensate for that.

"We're all over the world ? and this puts us in touch with the realities of the world," he said.

Pointing to prominent Salesians such as Cardinal Joseph Zen of Hong Kong and Rodriguez Maradiaga, Alluè said, "We all have the same approach of reaching everyone, especially reaching the poor, but without becoming political."

Alluè said the element of community in Salesian life is also helpful for members of the order who wind up as bishops.

"We stress community bonding, that we are tied to each other," he said. "So when you become a bishop, the local church becomes your community."

That's part of what Don Bosco meant, he said, by fostering a "family spirit."

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Despite their prominence internationally, the Salesians are relatively little known in the States. They have two provinces here, with a total of 285 priests, brothers and men in formation.

The Salesians arrived in 1897 in San Francisco, and in 1898 opened up shop in New York. Unsurprisingly, in both cases they followed waves of Italian immigration, delivering pastoral care for the Italians who were often shunned by the Irish-American clergy of the day.

Today, the Salesians operate nine high schools in the States, including Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey, N.J., whose high-powered football team is the first high school squad in American history to be honored with its own postal stamp. The Salesians are co-sponsoring a new Cristo Rey school in Washington, D.C., slated to open in the fall of 2007. They're also in 27 parishes.

I asked Alluè why the Salesians have not had the same growth in the States as in other countries.

For one thing, he said, the Salesian concern for poor youth has led them to open vocational and technical institutes around the world, but in the United States the cost of running these institutions, as well as the demanding nature of the legal requirements for doing so, have caused the Salesians to pull back.

Heuser, the Eastern provincial superior, added a historical factor.

"The charism of Don Bosco finds its most fertile soil in areas of greater poverty," he said.

"In our foundation and development here, we tended to stay with immigrant populations, such as Italians, Poles and Hispanics," Heuser said. He suggested that the Salesians in some ways never made the transition to "mainstream" ministry.

The Salesians, like many other communities, face declining vocations. Heuser said there are roughly four deaths a year in his province and two novices, a model that is obviously not sustainable forever.

The "strategy" for overcoming the shortage, he said, is to "sharpen our witness to the charism of Don Bosco," meaning "the primacy of God in our lives, deepening our experience of communion, and being present to the young."

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