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Follow-ups: Brothers in leadership posts and more on evolution

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 15, 2006 All Things Catholic

Editor's Note: *NCR* is moving its e-mail lists to a new user-authenticated system. To continue to receive e-mail alerts for this column, you must re-subscribe before Oct. 12. Follow this link: Sign-up Page[1]. The new system will help you and us control spam.

Last week I carried an item about Br. Mark Schenk, a lay friar recently elected by the Capuchins to serve on their General Council in Rome. I noted this was believed to be a first for the order.

In the early hours after the column went up, many religious wrote to indicate that their communities have had lay members serving in similar leadership roles for some time. (Ironically, in some cases the people they wrote to tell me about are actually personal friends).

My point was not that the Capuchin election was a first, but merely that the Capuchins responded with self-restraint after the disappointment of not being able to elect a brother as a provincial, and that this illustrates something about how to "push the envelope" faithfully in the church.

The Capuchins are not the only ones to have had this experience. I heard from one religious who said that in 2002 a province in his community also elected a brother as provincial. The province has the method of consultative votes, with appointment by the superior general. Under the terms of canon law, the superior requested the *recognition*, or confirmation, of the appointment from the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, popularly known as the "Congregation for Religious." It was refused.

As with the Capuchin case, the issue was jurisdiction over clergy. It was the same question that surrounded the appointment of Salesian Sr. Enrica Rosanna as under-secretary of the Congregation for Religious (to use the common designation).

All of this suggests that it's still a matter for ecclesiological reflection.

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Two weeks ago I analyzed Benedict XVI's thinking on the Theory of Evolution, trying to make the point that it cannot be reduced to a simple "yes" or "no," and that his concerns are primarily philosophical rather than scientific. As far as the strictly scientific questions go, his thinking was expressed from his 1990 commentaries on Genesis titled *In the Beginning*: "It is the affair of the natural sciences to explain how the tree of life in particular continues to grow, and how new branches shoot out from it. This is not a matter for faith."

Obviously not everyone in the leadership ranks of global Christianity agrees, as illustrated in a story this week

out of Kenya, where Protestant evangelical Bishop Boniface Adoyo has demanded that an exhibit of bones and skulls in Nairobi's National Museum of Kenya be removed.

"It's creating a big weapon against Christians that's killing our faith," Adoyo said. "When children go to museums they'll start believing we evolved from these apes."

Scientists consider the museum's collection to be unrivalled. Its fossils include those of the 4 million-year-old specimen, *Australopithecus anamensis*, and the 1.5 million-year-old remains of the Nariokotome boy, the most complete skeleton of an ancient human ever found. Many of these fossils were discovered by paleontologists Louis and Mary Leakey in areas around Lake Victoria and Lake Turkana.

Strictly from a PR point of view, anti-evolutionary broadsides such as Adoyo's are part of what makes it difficult for many commentators not to overreact when more nuanced critiques are offered by figures such as Benedict or Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, who started the current round of Catholic debate with a critical essay in *The New York Times* last August.

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