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Interview with Cardinal Daniel DiNardo

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 3, 2013 NCR Today
Conclave 2013

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Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston today joined a growing chorus of cardinals predicting that governance, what one might call ?business management,? will be a major preoccupation heading into the looming conclave to elect the next pope.

?The church?s house has to be in pretty good order to make sure that your message is being heard, and that you?re not stumbling,? DiNardo said. ?We?ve had some distractions lately, and we don?t need all those distractions.?

DiNardo spoke with NCR today at the North American College, the residence for American seminarians in Rome.

DiNardo also argued that the next pope has to have a broad global vision, to understand the highly diverse challenges and priorities facing Catholics in various parts of the world.

Other highlights from the interview include:

- DiNardo predicted that the General Congregation meetings of the cardinals, which begin tomorrow at 9:30 am Rome time, will be especially interested in listening to the over-80 cardinals who won?t be in the conclave.
- He said that he?s preparing to vote for the next pope by reading articles other cardinals have written, especially those publicly touted as candidates, as well as seeking out other sources of information ? such as, for instance, performing a Google search.
- DiNardo stressed that the next pope must also be a ?good communicator.?
- Because of DiNardo?s background as an old Roman hand, having worked in the Congregation for Bishops under the late Cardinal Bernardin Gantin from 1984 to 1990, he said he?s more or less able to tune out the pre-conclave speculation in the Italian media.
- Discussing the different hopes among various ethnic groups in Houston for the next pope, he said the city's large African diaspora would "love an African as pope."

The full text of the interview with DiNardo appears below.

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This is the first time you?ve been through this. So far, has anything surprised you?

One thing that was said to me, and I hadn?t thought about it before, is that when you do the General Congregation meetings, the cardinals will probably pay a lot of attention to those over 80. The reason is, they?re

not going into the conclave. A number of them have experience. They?ve been bishops of dioceses, or they?ve worked here, and so you?re going to pay attention. A number of them were in the previous conclave, so you want to make sure you?ve at least heard from them. I probably should have thought about that, but I hadn?t.

The other thing, and it almost sounds too pious, but people are really serious about this. This is serious stuff, it really is. There?s occasionally some humor, but people are pretty focused on what the church is facing.

Has it sunk in yet that this is, in some ways, the most momentous decision you?ll ever make in your life?

It?s beginning to, and if it wasn?t, after being here three days, it is. It?s pretty serious business, when you?re electing a pope. It?s the main source of unity for the church, so you?ve got to really think about this seriously. As we get nearer to the conclave, I?m sure it will sink in even more. I suspect the thing that will really get me, because I love music, is when we?re singing the *Veni Creator* while we?re walking into the Sistine Chapel. I tell you, I?ll be anxious then.

How are you preparing?

I pray about it every day. I have one or two people I know up at the Russicum [a pontifical college in Rome dedicated to study of the culture and spirituality of Russia]. I went up there for the night vigil last night. This is the Holy Cross Sunday for the Byzantine church in communion with Rome. It?s beautiful, because it?s so contemplative. A couple of hymns they sang about the cross made me realize that one of the things the pope is supposed to do, with joy but also with clarity, is to proclaim Christ crucified and risen. That hit me last night. I went there quietly and sat in the back, and one of the priests or seminarians came up and said, ?Thank you for praying for us. We promise we?ll pray for you when you do this, for the East.? That was a great moment.

I?m also doing some reading. My field is Patristics, so I?ve been reading some things about the see of Rome during the Patristic period, some issues the church faced then. You could say, what does that have to do with today? It gives you a good sense of the huge history here underlying our preparations.

Then, I?ve done some reading on some of the cardinals.

Some are guys you don?t know personally?

That?s right. There are a number I do know personally, including some of the ones whose names are being mentioned [as papal candidates], but there are others I don?t know as well. I want to read about them.

Where do you go for that kind of information?

I go to Google or other places. I also find that several of them have written articles, so you read them to get a sense of how they write, what their style is. You have some who write more like journalists, meaning their writing is very accessible. I?ve read others who are more professorial. For instance, a man who?s written a great deal is Scola. He has a long track record, with several books, and I?ve read one or two articles by him. You try to go across the board. Also, I?ve also listened to a few other [cardinals] about what they think.

You?ve got three fellow Americans in Cardinals George, Rigali and Mahony who have been through this before. Do you find yourself calling on them?

We certainly have talked with each other about some of the logistics, and we?ve shared insights. I have to say, it?s more on the level of issues in the church rather than any particular names right now. Maybe after tomorrow, people will be more intent on mentioning names. Right now, they seem to be more intent on saying things more generically. Now, they may have something specific in mind while they bring these particular issues up, but

that?s what we?re doing.

What are some of those issues?

You want someone who can teach well, there?s no question. The line I keep hearing is, someone is an incredible teacher in so far as he?s a good communicator. We?re much more intensely aware of this now, because of the media coverage, Twitter, and everything else.

There are two other balls you have to keep up in the air, one of which, and I?m very interested in this, is sanctifying. The life of the church is borrowed light from the Lord, who transmits it by sanctifying his church through the liturgy, prayer, and growth in holiness.

The third one, and the one that?s probably receiving some attention now, is governance.

Do you share the concern for governance?

I think we have to pay attention to it. The church?s house has to be in pretty good order to make sure that your message is being heard, and that you?re not stumbling because there might be some issues of governance that aren?t being handled well.

Do you agree governance isn?t being handled well in the Vatican?

I certainly have some agreement, yes. There?s an issue, although I haven?t been able to get to the bottom of what exactly it is. It just hasn?t worked. A lot of people want to place blame on certain individuals, but what I?ve been hearing around here is that it?s much more diffuse than that.

To my mind, one of the important issues of governance here is for the various offices of the pope?s chancery to speak to one another. Many people who work here, work very hard. I don?t think there?s an issue of people just running around not doing anything. Communication across the lines of the various offices, however, probably isn?t as strong as it could be.

To what extent are you paying attention to what?s in the papers right now? For instance, there was a report yesterday suggesting that Cardinals Sodano and Re are pushing Cardinal Scherer from Brazil, with Cardinal Piacenza as his Secretary of State. Are you following any of that?

This is the first I?ve heard that. I?m not following the Italians, and that?s probably the place where you find that sort of thing. I lived here for seven years, and the Italians love to carry on. My suspicion is, I would give that sort of report a grain of salt.

You?re not carrying that sort of thing around in your head?

I don?t think I could and still do the work I want to do, to get at the issues and then the persons I want to emphasize. Because I worked here, I know how the Italian way of approaching things works.

How do you size up the major challenges the next pope is going to face?

The big issue is that the pope is the sign of visible unity for the church. We have to find someone who is going to be that, who can be a visible sign of unity because he?s a disciple of Jesus Christ. That?s the first thing. What allowed Benedict to do that as pope, even though he had a reputation from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is that people noticed his simplicity of heart. By the way, I believe his homilies one day will be gathered into a collection, and we?re going to say this guy was equal to some of the great teachers of the past. The reason they were so great was because of his simplicity of heart. There?s no question there?s a theological

mind working through those homilies, but he had clarity and simplicity of heart in saying certain things, which I found refreshing.

I?m also looking for someone who is aware that most of the church is poor, most of the church is in a world that?s developing, and they look to the pope as a great sign of unity and keeps preaching Jesus Christ. In my mind that?s key, because most of the Catholics in the world are going to look to him for that. I don?t know that some of the issues that we in the first world hammer on really affect people.

In Galveston-Houston I?ve received a wide variety of letters, and while they may in one line mention some specific issue that?s of concern to them, most of them are just asking that we elect a pope. I?ve gotten letters from Protestants too. Houston is still a very intensely Baptist city, there?s no question, and they?re saying that we?re praying for you. They?re not voting about governance or any of the other issues, because they don?t understand all that stuff. It?s all Greek to them. I still think that?s the critical thing ? finding a pope who can credibly proclaim Christ to the world.

The pope has the keys, so he has to be someone who can articulate the faith well, but then also follow through on it. That?s one of his jobs as the successor of Peter, but he has to do that with unity. The only way to do that is to have some good governance, to give a vision that everybody picks up.

That includes not getting in the way of that vision by creating distractions because of breakdowns in governance?

That?s right. We?ve had some distractions lately, and we don?t need all those distractions.

In some ways, Houston is the global church in miniature. If I were to walk into a Hispanic parish in Houston and ask what they?re hoping for in the next pope, what do you think I would hear?

We?re doing some pastoral planning right now, in a far different way than other dioceses do it. We?re starting from the ground up and letting them set the agenda. When we started this, we started with adult formation. Those parishes that have more Anglos would speak in terms of classes and things of the life of the mind. You know what the Hispanic parishes asked for? More retreats, more days of recollection, more time to just pray together. My suspicion is that if you went to a Hispanic parish [and asked about the next pope], they would say, ?Will he love us? Will he pray? Will he make sure that he understands Mexico, or Guatemala?? Of course, they would also want to know, ?Does he love the Virgin Mary?? I kid you not, that?s real big. One of the ways that the Evangelicals in Houston get Mexicans to come to their churches is by putting a big picture up of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

What about a typical Vietnamese parish?

The Vietnamese have such deep love for the church of Rome because of their experience. My suspicion is that they would want the pope to continue to speak about the freedom of the church. The stories that you hear in Vietnamese parishes about what some of these people have gone through to come to the United States are incredible. Their Catholic faith is really deep, and they know the cost. I think they would want the Holy Father to keep being clear on the meaning of human rights, the human person, religious freedom, those kinds of things.

That?s why they love the United States so much. They?re more patriotic than we are, and I understand where they?re coming from. Recently I had a guy I was interviewing for a vocation to the priesthood, and I was just asking him questions about his family stability and so on. It was terribly embarrassing to me when he said one of his great-great grandfathers was one of the Vietnamese martyrs. I just felt like, why am I talking to him? He could interview me, the faith is so deeply rooted in his family.

You also have a large African diaspora in Houston ?

Lots of Nigerians and people from Cameroon.

What about them?

I think they would like to see an African pope! They?re very proud of their Catholic faith. They know they have a strong church, they?re growing. Let me give you an example. I did my first Ibo Mass in Houston right after I got there, in 2005. They used Ibo for the songs, the music, and I did everything else in English. The offertory procession alone took 25 minutes! The beautiful Ibo chant with drums, as they did it, was very moving. The whole congregation is in a movement of dance, because they?re bringing the gifts up. But guess what happens at the ?Holy, Holy Holy?? They sing it in Latin, without any sense that there was a problem. They?re tied to Rome and to the Latin sensibility of things. They know how the missionaries came in, and they?re very proud to be Roman Catholic. I do think they?d love an African as pope.

What about other ethnic groups in Houston?

We have to show special care for the African-American Catholics. With the presence of so many Hispanics and so many Africans, the African-American Catholics, who have suffered from racism, who have suffered in the church but have maintained their Catholic identity, sometimes feel forgotten. I want them to be kept in mind.

What do you think they?d say about the next pope?

I?m sure they want a pope who understands what it means when you live in oppression, that he be favorable to them. The African-Americans in Texas, by the way, have a wide variety among themselves, even in terms of liturgical practice. Some of the ones deeply rooted in Louisiana ? you go to their church for confirmation, and first of all they?re the best-dressed congregation you will ever see in the diocese. Secondly, though they have accepted to some extent the gospel stuff, they also sing some of the old French-style, semi-Latin devotional hymns very well. There?s no contradiction for them at all.

We could go on, because there are plenty of other groups in Houston. Given all the wild diversity in the church, of which Houston is a sort of microcosm, how does the next pope hold all that together?

By being true to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I do 60 confirmations a year, so I?m at a parish every weekend. Houston, and Texas generally, is one of the most dynamic churches I?ve ever seen. They want to be Catholic. So if you ask them about the next pope, they would say, ?Be Catholic! Speak the faith.? They love it. Houston is one of the most dynamic expressions of the Catholic faith around, although governing it is a little tricky. That makes me think, imagine the Holy Father in Rome, dealing with this wide variety.

Are you saying it?s important the pope have a global vision?

Absolutely. That doesn?t mean he has to come from any particular part of the world, but he needs a good global vision, an understanding that the Catholic faith is distinctive in various places. What unites us is the faith, but the expressions of it are wonderfully different.

The pope has to be open to those differences?

I think that?s necessary today. We?re 1.2 billion people, and we need to be alert to that wide variety. In Houston, like the growing church in the south generally, they?re very positive about the faith. There are parts of the developed world where people seem to me to be so negative, and I don?t understand that. There are problems, of course ? we?ve got all kinds of issues in Houston, but it?s not that they don?t love the Catholic

faith.

I?m pretty joyful about the church. I?m not naïve, but I?m hopeful.

The idea of a ?church in crisis? doesn?t resonate with you?

To a certain level it does. If people bring up particular issues, I?ll often say yes, you?re right. In the developed world, we do have issues. I?d be dumb not to see that. But overall, I?m much more hopeful. I?m in Houston, and we have wonderful stuff going on.

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