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Francis reboots Vatican system with new Secretary of State

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 31, 2013 NCR Today

In a small world such as the Vatican, personnel is always policy. Nothing says more about where a pope wants to go than the people he chooses to help get him there, and pride of place in that mix generally goes to the Secretary of State, by tradition a pope's "Prime Minister."

Today Francis filled that key slot, appointing 58-year-old Italian Archbishop Pietro Parolin to succeed 78-year-old Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who held the position under Pope Benedict XVI.

A veteran Vatican diplomat, Parolin has served for the past four years as the papal nuncio, or ambassador, to Venezuela, and has been on the front lines of shaping the Vatican's response to virtually every geopolitical challenge of the past two decades. By naming a consummate insider, Francis appears to want to "reboot" the Vatican's operating system back to a point when it was perceived to operate efficiently, rather than scrapping it entirely.

In a statement this morning, Parolin said "I feel the full weight of the responsibility placed upon me" and said "it is with trepidation that I place myself in this new service to the Gospel, to the church and to Pope Francis, but also with trust and serenity."

Pope Francis this morning also confirmed that the other top officials of the Secretariat of State will remain in their jobs, including Italian Archbishop Giovanni Angelo Becciu, the substitute, or top official for internal church affairs, and French Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Vatican's top official for foreign relations, as well as American Monsignor Peter Wells, the assessor, who has key responsibilities for day-to-day administration.

Francis also confirmed that German Archbishop Georg Gänswein, the key aide to Pope Benedict XVI, will remain head of the papal household.

Since Francis' election in March, Parolin had been on most short-lists for the job. In part that's because he spent the last four years in Latin America as the papal nuncio, or ambassador, to Venezuela, so he's a known quantity for the former Archbishop of Buenos Aires.

Mostly, however, it's because many observers believe that Parolin simply has the right stuff.

Over the years, the former number three official in the Vatican's diplomatic service has come to be seen as one of the "best and brightest" of his generation of ecclesiastical leaders. Admirers regard Parolin as hard-working, well informed, and gifted with the capacity to see issues from multiple points of view.

In 2006, *Inside the Vatican* magazine named Parolin one of its Top Ten people of the year, citing his work on nuclear disarmament, dialogue with Iran and North Korea, and the fight against human trafficking. The magazine called Parolin "one of the church's most tireless and effective diplomats."

The pick has been keenly anticipated, given that frustration with perceived breakdowns in governance under Bertone was part of what led the cardinals in March to elect a Latin American outsider to the papacy, handing him a clear reform mandate. Parolin now profiles as a key figure in that effort.

At the same time, longtime Vatican-watchers caution that Parolin may not wield quite the same power as his immediate predecessors, Bertone under Benedict and Cardinal Angelo Sodano under John Paul II.

Francis is a pope who takes the reins of government into his own hands, making him less dependent on aides, and the creation of a council of eight cardinals from around the world to assist him means that key decisions may be hammered out by that body rather than in the Secretariat of State.

In effect, the Secretary of State under Francis may profile more as a chief of staff rather than a sort of "vice-pope."

Parolin was ordained to the priesthood in 1980, and did his academic work in canon law. He entered the Vatican's diplomatic service in 1986 and spent time in embassies in Mexico and Nigeria before returning to Rome, initially as the Secretariat of State's desk officer for southern Europe.

In 2002, Parolin was named to the critical position of Under-Secretary for Relations with States, making him essentially the Vatican's deputy foreign minister. In that role, he a primary point of contact for foreign diplomats, international leaders, NGOs, and journalists, earning high marks for accessibility and candor.

Parolin represented the Vatican in a variety of sensitive assignments, including trips to North Korea and Vietnam as well as the 2007 "Annapolis Conference" on the Middle East convened by the Bush administration.

Parolin also fits the profile many Vatican-watchers had regarded as the ideal candidate to become Francis' Secretary of State: Someone who knows the system from the inside but who isn't associated with the perceived dysfunction of the Bertone years.

Though Parolin served under Bertone and moved up the ladder on his watch, he was already a fixture in the Secretariat of State before Bertone was given the top job by Benedict XVI in 2006. When he was shipped off to Caracas in 2009, some took it as a sign that Parolin had fallen out of favor with Bertone ? a perception seen as damaging then, but ironically helpful now.

Italians with long memories are reading the appointment as a sign that Francis wants to take the Secretariat of State back to its perceived glory days, under powerful and über-competent figures such as Giovanni Benelli, who served Paul VI, and Agostino Casaroli, who held the same position under John Paul II.

Indirectly, it's also being taken as a backhanded admission that the "Bertone experiment" ? bringing in a complete outsider as Secretary of State, counting on his loyalty and decency to make up for his lack of experience ? really didn't work.

Parolin is fluent in French, Spanish and English in addition to Italian.

Standing back from the details, the choice of Parolin would seem to offer at three insights about the kind of pope Francis intends to be.

First, Francis does not appear determined to dismantle the bureaucratic structures of the Vatican, but rather to make them work. If he wanted to blow things up, Francis would hardly have reached out to a career Vatican official, as well as an Italian churchman who hails from the Veneto region ? two strong indicators of continuity.

In effect, this outsider pope has acknowledged he needs some insider help. In that sense, his reform shapes up not as a wholesale rejection of previous ways of doing things, but rather as a sort of "system restore" operation.

Second, by naming a veteran diplomat, Francis has signaled that he doesn't want the church's political and cultural relevance to dim while he puts out fires and fixes internal problems.

In Parolin, Francis didn't just hire a CEO but also a statesman.

Third, Francis has also confirmed the moderate and pragmatic stamp of his papacy. Parolin profiles as basically non-ideological, a classic product of the Vatican's diplomatic corps who prizes flexibility and realism.

It's telling that during Parolin's four years in Venezuela, which coincided with the final years of Hugo Chávez, Parolin never engaged in the testy back-and-forth with the leftist strongman associated with many of the country's bishops, preferring to practice quiet, behind-the-scenes diplomacy.

The Secretary of State is a cardinal's job, though Francis broke with custom by not naming Parolin "pro-secretary" until the next consistory, when Francis presumably will elevate him to the College of Cardinals.

Though being Secretary of State is a prestigious gig, a mini-boom of speculation on the Internet back in 2006 had Parolin in line for an even higher position. A note about the papal prophecies of the medieval Abbot Malachy posted on the Wikipedia website speculated that Parolin might be the *Petrus Romanus*, or "Peter the Roman", whom Abbot Malachy predicts will be the last pope before the end of the world. ("Pietro" means "Peter" in Italian.)

Whether Parolin will ever be elected pope, and whether that triggers the apocalypse, obviously remains to be seen, but already this particular Peter is now a very big deal.

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