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A 'Francis imprint' on US bishops may take time

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 7, 2013
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Arguably, nothing a pope does is more decisive in shaping Catholic culture than appointing bishops, and that's especially true for one who wants change. Francis has sketched a beguiling vision of a more merciful and compassionate church, one less invested in the culture wars, but pulling it off will require finding bishops to match.

As critical as that task is, it may be a while yet before Francis truly puts his imprint on the Catholic bishops of the United States.

The pope has laid out his notion of church leadership several times, most notably in a June 21 speech to his nuncios, or ambassadors, who play a lead role in recommending new bishops. Francis told them to seek "pastors who are close to their people, fathers and brothers, who are meek, patient and merciful."

He also said that he doesn't want prelates with the "psychology of a prince."

In the United States, Francis inherits 450 active and retired bishops, and many at least seem to realize he's steering them in a new direction. Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York has said Francis "wants to shake us up," while Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore, who heads the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, acknowledged a new caution about appearing strident on matters such as abortion, gay marriage and contraception.

"Every time I make a statement about one of these things, I will certainly take another look at it and ask, 'Does this really lead people back to the heart of the Gospel?' " Lori recently told The Associated Press.

Francis does not, however, appear to be in any rush to name his own crop of new American prelates.

As of the end of September, Francis had named just 10 bishops in the United States, including two archbishops: Michael Jackels in Dubuque, Iowa, appointed April 8, and Bernard Hebda in Newark, N.J., named coadjutor archbishop Sept. 24.

Jackels and Hebda are old Roman hands who would probably have been strong candidates to move up no matter who was pope, so most observers would say they're not really proof of dramatic realignment.

There are three reasons why swift transformation is unlikely, beginning with the fact that Francis has not yet overhauled the personnel responsible for recommending American bishops.

Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò remains nuncio in the United States, and under ordinary circumstances he wouldn't be replaced for another three years, when he turns 75. Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet is also still prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops, and at 69 he's not poised to retire.

Though Francis has not confirmed Ouellet, perhaps because the No. 2 position in his department is vacant,

observers say he has a good relationship with the pope, based in part on the Ouellet's years in Latin America as a theology professor.

Francis likewise has not added or subtracted any American members to the Congregation for Bishops, which means that the same prelates who had a voice in nominations under Pope Benedict XVI -- Cardinals Raymond Burke, William Levada and Justin Rigali -- are still at the table.

In any event, simple math dictates that it will be a while before Francis has a chance to name a critical mass of new bishops.

There are 32 archdioceses in the United States, whose bishops tend to have the biggest impact in setting the national tone. Their average age today is 64.2, which means that under ordinary circumstances it would be roughly 10 years before Francis would have the chance to replace them.

There are only four American archdioceses where the incumbent is either already 75, or will reach retirement age within the next two years:

- Anchorage, Alaska, where Archbishop Roger Schwietz is 73;
- Chicago, where Cardinal Francis George is 76;
- Hartford, Conn., where Archbishop Henry Mansell turns 76 on Oct. 10;
- Santa Fe, N.M., where Archbishop Michael Sheehan is 74.

Given that Francis is himself 76, Chicago could turn out to be his only opportunity to name a new residential cardinal in the United States -- unless he brings one of the current American cardinals to Rome, or otherwise creates a vacancy.

Finally, the pope's focus at the moment isn't really on local bishops. Instead, he's concentrating on rounding out his team in the Vatican.

Sources tell *NCR* that the lone nomination in the English-speaking world to date to draw personal interest from Francis was the July 24 choice of Leo Cushley as the new archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh in Scotland, which was sensitive because of sex abuse scandals surrounding the previous incumbent, Cardinal Keith O'Brien.

Some read the appointment of a coadjutor in Newark as an indirect rebuke from Francis to Archbishop John Myers for his alleged mishandling of sex abuse cases both in Newark and his previous diocese of Peoria, Ill., but both Myers and Hebda denied that in an interview with *NCR*.

Myers argued that had the appointment been a reprimand, the coadjutor probably would have been given special powers. Hebda pointed out that coadjutors have also been named recently in Houston, Cincinnati and Los Angeles, and said that "nothing was said to me about any difficulties here" -- suggesting the choice was more routine than the result of special papal intervention.

When Francis does turn to choosing American bishops in earnest, the best candidate to play the role of "king-maker" may be Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston.

O'Malley is the lone American cardinal to have a personal relationship with the new pope, knowing Latin America well and having stayed in then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio's residence in Buenos Aires. He's the only American on the new council of eight cardinals to advise Francis on governance.

If Francis taps O'Malley as a member of the Congregation for Bishops, informally taking the seat vacated by

Cardinal Bernard Law when he turned 80 in November 2011, it would cement O'Malley's profile as the go-to American.

One other looming crossroads is the U.S. bishops' fall meeting Nov. 12-15, when they'll elect Dolan's successor as conference president.

That ballot will be closely watched to see if the bishops choose someone consonant with the new papal tone -- or whether, in an era in which they can't necessarily count on the pope to carry the fight on their political priorities, they turn to someone even more inclined to come out swinging.

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