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What do the USCCB elections mean?

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 12, 2013 Distinctly Catholic
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The election of Archbishop Joseph Kurtz as president [1] of the USCCB was widely expected. But I think everyone was a bit surprised that the election was achieved on the first ballot. It is not easy to get more than 50 percent of the vote in a contest with 10 candidates.

The fact that +Kurtz won a majority so quickly attests to three things. First, the bishops want to return to the practice of allowing a USCCB president three years as veep as a kind of preparation for the post. Second, +Kurtz is not seen as belonging to any party or faction and so is ideally suited to lead a conference that has been dominated in recent years by conservatives and is now grappling with Pope Francis' call to focus on issues that have a more leftward tilt, at least as they intersect with U.S. politics. Third, +Kurtz is a great guy and almost everyone likes him. Fr. Anthony Chandler, a priest of the archdiocese of Louisville and an old chum of mine, told me, "Archbishop Kurtz is a very genuine person. He works hard to give people the opportunity to share their views. He will work very hard. He keeps an amazing schedule in the archdiocese and gets to meet lots of people." Sounds like the kind of guy the bishops can live with for the next three years.

The election of Cardinal Daniel DiNardo as vice president is more difficult to read. As I noted before, I have never really gotten a handle on +DiNardo. He is very bright, and he has studied academically and works into his talks lots of references to the Church Fathers, which is a quick way to my heart.

Two years ago, +DiNardo gave the opening talk at the Doctrine Committee's meeting with theologians. Charles Camosy of Fordham, who was at that meeting, told me, "Cardinal DiNardo's talk about the Church Fathers was solid, but more important than what he said was the fact that he said it. One of the reasons for tension between bishops and theologians is that, for a variety of reasons, we rarely get a chance to engage one another. Furthermore, most bishops spend most of their time doing nonacademic work, so it can be a bit intimidating to engage with those who us who do this stuff full time. It impressed me that Cardinal DiNardo came to meet with us, share some thoughts, and eat and drink together. Understanding and charity comes more easily when you share a meal or drink."

That meeting was arranged by Cardinal Donald Wuerl, who then chaired the Doctrine Committee, but the fact that both cardinals were there indicated a willingness to seek to improve relations with theologians -- a necessary step, and one that suggests +DiNardo will be less of a culture warrior than the last standing alternative in the race, Archbishop Charles Chaput.

Three years ago, Chaput also ran for the presidency and vice presidency of the conference. And he lost then too, with almost the same number of votes. Turns out there is a significant number of bishops who like the culture warrior approach. And if the nuncio wants to know just how many bishops in the US do not really much like Pope Francis, he now knows precisely: 87.

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