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When Dolan Jumped the Queue

Ken Briggs | Nov. 12, 2013 NCR Today
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Several reports of the choice of a new bishops' president [1] noted gingerly that this election had returned to the traditional process of naming successors. That is, the outgoing vice president would be given the top job and the bishops would elect a vice president who became next in line.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan broke the mold in 2010, inserting himself into the contest and winning it without following the usual protocol. Many bishop-watchers saw it as an insult to the then-vice president, Bishop Gerald Kicanas* of Tucson, Ariz., but it also seemed to bolster a scenario by which the bold, media-savvy archbishop was being promoted as the Vatican's point man in an effort to gain influence on particular issues. Dolan appeared to relish the attention and the assertion of traditional Catholic values. It appeared to myself and others that he had elbowed his way into the limelight without a trace of apology or hesitation.

The question was whether he had become president at Rome's behest. Did the bishops do the bidding of the Vatican, perhaps the pope? If so, they would have accepted the terms of a rigged election. To read it that way makes an assumption that meddling took place that would be dirty pool in terms of our civil politics but considered perfectly normal within hierarchical ranks where the lesser authority is expected to defer to the greater. Democratic practices as means of deciding policy exists only under highly exceptional conditions in the church.

The return to the regular conveyer belt this time may or may not indicate anything. Maybe all would-be presidents and vice presidents must receive approval from Rome. The church certainly has every right to conduct its affairs that way. It's just that from a one-man one-vote point of view,it would be nice to think that they were free to chose their own leaders.

I'm sure many of you know more than I do about this nuance, and your observations and information are most welcome.

**An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified the former vice president of the USCCB.*

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/63936