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What's new with the American bishops?

Pat Perriello | Nov. 19, 2013 NCR Today
Fall bishops' meeting 2013

Has anything changed with the U.S. Catholic bishops? It is far too early to tell, but there were a few interesting things that occurred last week in Baltimore [1]. First of all, the bishops returned to their normal process for selecting their president by elevating the current vice president [2] to the presidency. When Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York was chosen three years ago, they skipped over the bishop who was in line for the job.

While in itself this change may not be significant, the bishop they did choose may be. Obvious conservative candidates were passed over to come up with the choice of Archbishop Joseph Kurtz [3] of Louisville, Ky., who has a background in social work. Cardinal Daniel DiNardo from Houston was selected vice president and would be in line for the presidency in three years. Such conservative favorites as Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia and Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore were not selected. Just a hunch, but I wonder if one of these prelates would now be president if not for the papacy of Pope Francis.

The presence of Pope Francis seemed to be quite real at the bishops' meeting. The Vatican's ambassador to the United States, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, challenged the bishops to be pastors [4] and not ideologues in his address to the assembled bishops. The message seems to be pretty clear. Pope Francis not only expects something to change in how the bishops do business, but he is leaving no doubt as to his intentions.

One might also surmise that the message of Pope Francis is beginning to resonate a bit. Cardinal Dolan's presentation at the meeting moved away from past emphasis on the battle over birth control in the new health care law. The distorted notion of religious freedom advocated by some bishops was barely mentioned. Instead, Cardinal Dolan chose to broaden the focus of religious liberty [5] by giving it an international dimension. Dolan spoke about religious freedom around the world and the real persecutions our brothers and sisters in the faith endure in a number of countries.

The message I'm getting from all of this is that Pope Francis is serious about effecting change. Despite the strong rhetoric in the statement the bishops released [6] regarding their fight over health care, I believe that statement primarily reflects the inevitable struggles involved in producing real change.

Change will not be easy. There will be resistance. What change does occur is likely not to be enough for those looking for major reforms quickly.

Yet there are indications that a number of bishops are beginning to get the message. I believe many of them are genuinely committed to move in the direction Francis seeks. They are still feeling their way. It requires a real metanoia. It is never easy to change your mind.

Just one example might be the willingness of the bishops to discuss seeking meaningful input from the laity for the upcoming Synod of Bishops in Rome, as requested by Pope Francis. Change is on the way. It is critical that the momentum be sustained and that it grows in intensity. Those of us in the pews need to challenge and demand more from those who would lead us.

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