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The Shake-up In Rome

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 16, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

As few weeks back, I wondered why Cardinal Marc Ouellet had not been confirmed as Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops. Now, we know. This morning, the Holy Father announced a major shake-up of that all-important congregation, confirming Cardinal Ouellet as prefect, but shuffling the membership in profound ways, especially for the Church in the United States.

I confess to being a bit amazed. Nine months ago, Pope Francis knew very little about the Church in the U.S. But, the day of his election, a bishop in Latin America who knew him told me that the word he would use to describe him is ?astute.? Indeed. In nine short months, Pope Francis realized that we have a problem in the hierarchy of the U.S. and that the problem had a name. Actually, two names: Cardinals Raymond Burke and Justin Rigali. Both of them have been removed from the Congregation for Bishops. Hallelujah.

Cardinals Burke and Rigali represent different types of problems. Burke is the consummate culture warrior and he has encouraged the appointment of men to prominent sees who, like himself, look out at the world and see nothing but dread, who have bought into a narrative in which all the Church?s problems and challenges are someone else?s fault, and that the Gospel is best preached from a defensive crouch, with finger wagging at any and all who do not see the world as they do. I cannot think of a single churchmen who is less like Pope Francis, and the difference goes far beyond Cardinal Burke?s penchant for the cappa magna. Those of us who were disappointed by the appointments in San Francisco and Portland, Oregon, and Denver and, most recently, Hartford, could discern the influence of Cardinal Burke ? and behind him Cardinals Harvey and Law ? in those appointments.

Cardinal Rigali?s problem is of a different sort. He has ruined everything he ever touched, as one archbishop reportedly said to a friend of mine. He left Philadelphia a mess, a string of Grad Jury reports detailing malfeasance in dealing with clergy sex abuse that rivaled the pro-Dallas Charter days. Rigali left St. Louis a mess ? but not before promoting a certain Msgr. Robert Finn into the upper ranks of the St. Louis chancery, setting him on the road to Kansas City-St. Joseph. His removal from the Congregation for Bishops, where he once served as Secretary, also shows Pope Francis? willingness to rid the curia of the influence of Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, who was content to look the other way as corruption spread through the curia.

Not only are Burke and Rigali off the congregation, but Cardinal William Levada was kept on, and Washington?s Cardinal Donald Wuerl placed on as a new member. Both choices warm the heart and indicate another victory for the sanity caucus. Levada is razor sharp smart, and in his pastoral assignments, demonstrated a preference for non-culture warrior approaches to the challenges facing the Church. As early as 1996, he famously worked out a solution to the conundrum of same-sex partner benefits for Catholic Church agencies that contract with the city government. Upon his appointment as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, conservatives gnashed their teeth. And, it should be noted, succeeding Cardinal Ratzinger at CDF was an almost impossible job under any circumstance. Succeeding Ratzinger after he had been elected pope took away the ?almost? in that last sentence ? the job was simply impossible. Yet, Cardinal Levada could hold his

head high when he left the post last year, having overseen the operations at the Congregation wisely and efficiently as it grappled not only with difficult theological issues but with the enormous work of processing sex abuse charges. Not everyone would agree with every decision he made as Prefect, including myself, but his tenure at CDF was one of distinction.

The appointment of Cardinal Wuerl to the congregation is very good news. I confess my bias: Wuerl is my archbishop so I have a home team enthusiasm for this appointment. But, my reasons for being delighted are larger than that. Like Levada, Wuerl is super smart, super orthodox but he has never treated the Truth as a wet rag to throw into other people?s faces, to borrow a phrase form Cardinal O?Malley. He is a pastor first and foremost, not a culture warrior. We can recall his handling of case of Father Marcel [1]Guarniz [1]o, who denied communion to a woman at her mother?s funeral because the woman was a lesbian. Wuerl has stood up to those who argued he should deny communion within the archdiocese to politicians who did not support the Church?s stance on neuralgic issues, correctly pointing out that most politicians in Washington are not parishioners here, and that any disciplinary actions should be undertaken by their bishops back home. And, as for those who do live here, Wuerl correctly understood that denying communion to politicians was lousy theology.

Second, Wuerl has been almost giddy about Pope Francis since his election last March. At the brunch after the Red Mass this year, Wuerl spoke about Pope Francis and his enthusiasm and excitement were palpable. In addition to the enthusiasm, though, Wuerl has the competence to see that Pope Francis is getting the kinds of names for new bishops that reflect the priorities the Holy Father has identified, men with the ?smell of the sheep,? upon them, men who have worked in the trenches, not just the chanceries. I would look for more directors of diocesan Catholic Charities, more parish priests, and fewer seminary rectors or former curial officials on ternas going to the pope in the months and years ahead.

Third, Wuerl is rock solid on the threshold issue facing the hierarchy: dealing with the abuse of children by clergy. I say ?threshold? because if the Church does not get this right, the people in the pews will not listen on any other issue. Cardinal Wuerl has been getting this issue right for a long time, even taking on the Vatican curia itself back in the early 90s in the infamous Fr. Cipolla case. Here in Washington, he has followed in the footsteps of his predecessors Cardinals Hickey and McCarrick in dealing promptly and transparently with charges of clergy sex abuse. No one in Washington worries about a trove of documents from the chancery being leaked to the press or disclosed in court proceedings.

Finally, Wuerl?s personality seems conducive to this post. It takes a special kind of person to be a favorite to both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis. I do not know Cardinal Wuerl well, but I have watched him as our archbishop for eight years now. He is a formal man, but not the least bit self-important, and he is unfailingly friendly and engaging. He took the initiative to convoke an archdiocesan synod with a wide consultation of the lay faithful, and he did so before Pope Francis started highlighting the importance of synodality. He was a priest in his cradle, but he is no clericalist. He is a workaholic by all accounts, and the Congregation for Bishops requires a great deal of work. He took the initiative to convoke a group of young theologians so they could interact with members of the hierarchy, bringing them to Washington for a meeting on the New Evangelization. Most importantly, he is a pastor first and foremost.

Rome was not built in a day. It will not be re-built in a day either. But, the changes at the Congregation for Bishops point to a new day in the life of the Church in the United States. And, not just the United States: A friend tells me that the new appointments of Latino cardinals to the congregation are all very fine men. And, I was delighted to see Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster added to the bench as well. Pope Francis has shown that he is indeed astute, and has taken the first step towards making sure that new bishops reflect the priorities he has set. No more is an out-sized devotion to the Extraordinary Form to be taken as a sign of pastoral depth. No more will being part of the cronyism of the curia going to earn one a miter. No more will

scars from the barricades in the culture wars get one a pallium. It is a great day to be alive.

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