

## End of Danneels era in Belgium completes European facelift

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 15, 2010 NCR Today

One of my early reporting assignments in Rome was to cover the European Synod in 1999, and I remember sitting down over dinner my first night in town with a few veteran *vaticanisti*. They gave me the lay of the land, among other things explaining that the liberal bloc in the European church had long been led by three towering cardinals: Carlo Maria Martini of Milan, Basil Hume of Westminster (who died shortly before the synod), and Godfried Danneels of Brussels.

More than ten years later, Hume is gone and Martini is retired, and in a matter of days it seems likely the third member of the trio will also be out of job. Rumors in Belgium suggest that sometime soon, Pope Benedict XVI intends to appoint Bishop André-Mutien Léonard of Namur to succeed Danneels in Brussels.

If so, the changing of the guard at the senior levels of the European church will be virtually complete.

By Catholic standards, the facelift has been remarkably swift. In Milan, Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi followed Martini in 2002; in Westminster, Archbishop Vincent Nichols took the reins from Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor last April, who had succeeded Hume in February 2000. Now it seems that Léonard, 69, is poised to arrive in Brussels. Sources in Belgium this morning said the announcement is expected soon.

To be sure, few would argue that Tettamanzi or Nichols are to the Catholic right what Martini and Hume were to the left. Instead, their profile is more as centrists, embracing the broadly pastoral style associated with their predecessors but leavening it with a slightly more "evangelical" outlook — more willing to defend Catholic identity and to challenge secular nostrums.

By some accounts, Léonard may represent a more dramatic change in tone. The Italian Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli reports that Léonard is considered "the most traditional of the Belgian bishops," pointing out that almost three years ago the liberal French Catholic publication *Golias* sounded an alarm about the prospect that Léonard could be the new man in Brussels. The piece noted that Léonard had welcomed the decision of Benedict XVI to authorize wider celebration of the old Latin Mass, that he has come to the defense of Pope Pius XII, and that he has consistently taken sharply conservative positions in the European "culture wars" on matters such as homosexuality and gay marriage.

All of that has occasionally made Léonard a lightning rod. In 2008, some pro-gay activist groups in Belgium sought to have him charged with homophobia under the country's 2003 anti-discrimination act for comments in an interview suggesting that homosexuality is a result of a blockage in normal sexual development. (Léonard was also quoted as calling homosexuality "abnormal," though he denied using that term.)

In that same interview, Léonard even joked about the possibility of legal blowback: "I know very well that in a few years, I could be imprisoned for holding this position," he said, "but this could mean a bit of a vacation for me."

In the end, a Belgian court decided that even if the bishop's comments were hurtful to some homosexuals, they

did not rise to the level of slander or discrimination.

tAssuming it materializes, Léonard's appointment would reflect a tendency under Benedict XVI to entrust important assignments to people with whom he's personally familiar. Léonard has taught at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium and has served as a member of the International Theological Commission, the main advisory body to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In 2001, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Léonard were both on the program for a liturgical conference at the Benedictine monastery at Fontgombault in France, where Ratzinger advocated a "reform of the reform."

tLéonard is also no stranger to the Vatican. He's often asked to speak at various events in Rome, and in 1999, Pope John Paul II asked him to preach the annual Lenten retreat for the Roman Curia.

tAccording to a biography provided by the Namur diocese, Léonard is the youngest of four sons, all of whom became diocesan priests. He is a war orphan, as his father died when he was just ten days old. After his ordination in 1964, Léonard completed a doctorate in philosophy at Leuven, writing his thesis on Hegel. He later joined the faculty at Leuven and was appointed to the International Theological Commission in 1987, while Ratzinger was the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

tAs Bishop of Namur since 1991, Léonard has focused in particular upon youth ministry and the promotion of vocations to the priesthood. His seminary complex, which also includes a Redemptoris Mater seminary run by the Neocatechumenate, is said to have the largest enrollment in Belgium.

tIn what may amount to his swan song on the global stage as the Archbishop of Brussels, Danneels recently gave a lengthy interview to the Italian Catholic publication *30 Giorni*. The English version may be found here: <http://www.30giorni.it/us/articolo.asp?id=21854>

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 12/06/2013 - 04:49):** <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/end-danneels-era-belgium-completes-european-facelift>