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Rumored new doctrinal czar has liberation theology ties

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 28, 2012 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

tAlthough speculation about who?s in line for top Vatican jobs is a favorite indoor sport in Catholicism, usually to be taken with a grain of salt, you can sometimes tell a rumor is serious when pot shots start falling on the would-be nominee.

tBy that standard, Bishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller of Regensburg, Germany, has to be considered a hot tip for the next prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican?s powerful doctrine office currently headed by American Cardinal William Levada.

tLevada will turn 76 in June, and it?s long been rumored that Müller, 64, is a top candidate to take over. This week, traditionalist Catholics in Italy began circulating e-mails suggesting that Müller, a member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and a lifelong friend of Pope Benedict XVI, is not a man of ?secure doctrine.?

tSpecifically, the e-mails faulted Müller for espousing suspect positions on the virginity of Mary (which he said in a 2003 book shouldn?t be understood in a ?physiological? sense), the Eucharist (Müller has apparently counseled against using the term ?body and blood of Christ? to describe the consecrated bread and wine at Mass), and ecumenism (last October, Müller declared that Protestants are ?already part of the church? founded by Christ.)

tWhatever evaluation one makes of those points, the e-mails suggest that rumors around Müller?s possible appointment have set off alarms in traditionalist circles.

t Müller has long been something of a paradox. In Germany, he?s seen as a staunch defender of Catholic orthodoxy, often at odds with the liberal reform group ?We Are Church?, and he clearly enjoys papal favor.

Aside from the fact that Müller is the bishop of the pope?s home diocese, where Benedict?s brother Geörg still resides, he?s also the editor of Benedict?s ?Opera Omnia,? a comprehensive collection of all the pope?s writings.

Müller himself is a prolific author, having written more than 400 works on a wide variety of theological topics.

tDespite his broadly conservative reputation, Müller actually earned his doctorate in 1977 under then-Fr. Karl Lehmann, who went on to become the cardinal of Mainz and the leader of the moderate wing of the German bishops? conference. Müller?s dissertation was on the famed German Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

tMoreover, Müller is a close personal friend of the renowned Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, considered the father of liberation theology. Every year since 1998, Müller has travelled to Peru to take a course from Gutiérrez, and has spent time living with farmers in a rural parish near the border with Bolivia.

tIn 2008, he accepted an honorary doctorate from the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, which is widely seen as a bastion of the progressive wing of the Peruvian church. On the occasion, he praised Guttierez and defended his theology.

?The theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez, independently of how you look at it, is orthodox because it is orthopractic,? he said. ?It teaches us the correct way of acting in a Christian fashion since it comes from true faith.?

In the same speech, Müller described "neo-liberal capitalism" as the "infamy of our age."

All that suggests the church might be in for some surprises should Müller indeed inherit the Vatican?s top doctrinal job.

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