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Bus-riding bishop named top cleric in Philippines

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 24, 2011

Bishop Luis Tagle (CNS/Carol Glatz)

Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle of Imus, Philippines, a guitar-playing cleric who eschews clerical garb and takes public transportation, has been named the next archbishop of Manila, one of the most high-profile sees in Asia.

The announcement of Tagle?s appointment, which puts him in line to become a cardinal, was made by the Catholic Bishops? Conference of the Philippines Oct. 13. The current archbishop, Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales, had reached the mandatory retirement age of 75 and resigned.

Tagle told the church-run Radio Veritas that he was ?overwhelmed? and ?humbled? by the appointment. He said he had barely slept the night before the announcement and was tearful when he woke up.

Tagle is a youthful-looking 54. The story goes that in the mid-1990s, when then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger introduced Tagle to Pope John Paul II as a new member of the Vatican?s International Theological Commission, Ratzinger jokingly assured the pope that the Filipino had, in fact, received his first Communion.

Some church watchers in Rome and the Philippines say that Tagle could be pope someday.

Born in Manila, Tagle went to seminary in Quezon City and later did his doctoral work at The Catholic University of America in Washington. He also studied in Rome before returning to the Philippines to serve as a pastor and teacher. He quickly came to be seen as a rising star in the Asian church, explaining his appointment in 1997 to the Vatican?s main doctrinal advisory body. He was named bishop of Imus in 2001.

Theologically and politically, Tagle is considered balanced. He?s taken strong positions against the Philippines? proposed Reproductive Health Bill, which includes promotion of birth control. Yet his towering social concern is defense of the poor, and he?s also got a strong environmental streak.

Tagle?s doctoral dissertation at Catholic University, written under Fr. Joseph Komonchak, was a favorable treatment of the development of episcopal collegiality at the Second Vatican Council. Moreover, Tagle served for 15 years on the editorial board of the Bologna, Italy-based ?History of Vatican II? project founded by Giuseppe Alberigo, criticized by some conservatives for an overly progressive reading of the council.

Alberto Melloni, an Italian academic and writer, directs the Bologna project. He calls Tagle ?a thinker of real value,? whose dissertation represents an important chapter in the history of Vatican II, and someone who?s ?talented and serious.?

Back in the Philippines, Tagle, who goes by the nickname ?Chito,? is well-loved for his warmth and humor, for his simplicity, for his ability to express complex ideas in attractive and understandable language, for his balance and openness, and for his lack of ego.

He told Radio Veritas that when he first heard he was going to Manila, he didn?t tell anybody, because ?I thought maybe the pope would change his mind.?

One Filipino commentator said Tagle has ?a theologian?s mind, a musician?s soul and a pastor?s heart.?

In the Imus diocese, Tagle was famous for not owning a car and taking the bus to work every day, describing it as a way to combat the isolation that sometimes comes with high office. He was also known for inviting beggars outside the cathedral to come in and eat with him; one woman was quoted describing a time she went looking for her blind, out-of-work, alcoholic husband, suspecting she might track him down in a local bar, only to find that he was lunching with the bishop.

Here?s another typical story. Not long after Tagle arrived in Imus, a small chapel located in a rundown neighborhood was waiting for a priest to say Mass at around 4:00 a.m., for a group mostly made up of day laborers. Eventually a youngish cleric showed up on a cheap bicycle, wearing simple clothes and ready to start the Mass. An astonished member of the congregation realized it was the new bishop, and apologized that they hadn?t prepared a better welcome. Tagle said it was no problem; he got word late the night before that the priest was sick, and decided to say the Mass himself.

Tagle is a gifted communicator, making him a sought-after speaker and media personality. He drew rave reviews for his performance at a 2008 International Eucharistic Congress in Quebec, where observers say he brought an entire stadium to tears. Vatican-watchers also rated him among the most impressive contributors to both the 2005 Synod on the Eucharist and the 2008 Synod on the Word of God. He?s also a very 21st-century prelate -- he hosts a program on YouTube, and he?s got his own Facebook page.

Though a loyal churchman, Tagle is unafraid to raise tough questions (at the 2005 synod, he pointedly said the church must confront the priest shortage, which struck some as a way of hinting at flexibility on celibacy) or to challenge what he considers abuses (some of the toughest language you?ll ever find denouncing clerical arrogance and privilege is in his writings).

One Filipino priest wrote after Tagle?s appointment was announced: ?Who knows, we may have in [Tagle] the first Asian pope.?

Even if that doesn?t pan out, Tagle is destined to be an important face and voice for the burgeoning Catholic population in Asia and the entire developing world, and that makes him someone worth getting to know.

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