NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Bishops' 'religious liberty' point man gets a promotion

David Gibson Religion News Service | Mar. 21, 2012

Archbishop William E. Lori delivers the homily during Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore March 20, after Pope Benedict XVI named him the new archbishop of Baltimore.

BRIDGEPORT, Conn. -- If there is any Catholic bishop in the U.S. who probably didn't need a bigger platform, it would be William E. Lori, who was named Tuesday (March 20) by Pope Benedict XVI as the next archbishop of Baltimore.

For the past decade, Lori has led the Diocese of Bridgeport in Connecticut's Fairfield County, but in recent months he's become the public face of the hierarchy's new signature issue: the fight for "religious freedom."

It's a fight that has defined Lori's career -- and is likely to define the public face of the church in the months to come.

In political terms, Lori has been tasked with coordinating the bishops' opposition to the White House's birth control mandate as well as opposing gay marriage and a host of other hot-button controversies.

Last September, Lori was tapped to lead the bishops' new Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Liberty in order to sharpen the bishops' message and raise their profile after years of playing defense in the clergy sexual abuse scandals.

In recent months, Lori has testified in Congress three times, and the bishops' fight with the White House has dominated the headlines and even seeped into the 2012 presidential race.

"To tell you the truth, I feel a sense of urgency about it," Lori said, with some understatement, in an interview a few days before his promotion. "But at the same time it's a work that's important and fulfilling and I enjoy it."

Quiet and soft-spoken, Lori nonetheless brings a single-minded focus to defending sacred principles while also deploying the kind of double-edged humor that a religious leader needs to do battle in the public square. He can be sharp to the point of sarcastic but also self-effacing in regards to his own career.

"They say timing is everything," Lori said with the quiet laugh of a man who tends to see the irony and absurdity of so many aspects of modern life.

Now, with the move to Baltimore -- the oldest archdiocese in the U.S. -- timing is again Lori's ally. At just 60 years old, his new post will put him that much closer to the action, and now he'll have a papal imprimatur to bring with him.

Unlike the gregarious Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, who is president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Lori is slightly-built and almost shy. He likes nothing more than reading history, and loves books so much that he named his pair of sibling Golden Retrievers "Barnes" and "Noble."

"I am dialed-down quite a bit from Cardinal Dolan, no doubt about that," Lori said during an interview in the chapel at Sacred Heart University.

Lori learned the virtue of hard work from his immigrant family, especially his Sicilian grandfather, who arrived in America in the depths of the Great Depression and managed to launch a successful fruit and vegetable store. Born in Louisville, Ky., and raised in nearby Indiana, Lori watched his grandfather work in his garden until he was 87, and it was a lesson he never forgot.

"I'm happy, and I love working," he said. "Happiness and hard work go hand in hand."

It was also a lesson Lori took to the seminary, and it paid off. After studies in Kentucky, he earned a master's degree from Mount Saint Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Md., and was ordained in 1977. He earned his doctorate from Catholic University five years later, and after a brief stint as an associate pastor in suburban Washington, he went to work for the late Cardinal James Hickey of Washington.

Lori wound up working for Hickey for 18 years, serving in a variety of posts and learning even more about what it meant to work hard: "There are two words that I feared most at 10:00 at night from the cardinal: 'Second wind.' That would mean you were going until one in the morning."

In 2001, Lori was appointed to Bridgeport. Knowing that he could be made a bishop, he says he checked to see which dioceses had vacancies, and saw two: Bridgeport and Fairbanks, Alaska. "I said a little prayer that it might be the former. I'm just not that good at ice fishing and flying a Cessna," he said.

Within months, Lori was facing two huge crises: the 9/11 attacks that claimed many of his new flock, and the clergy abuse crisis that has continued to dog the hierarchy.

While Lori is known for his orthodoxy on doctrine and social issues, he was praised by many for taking a hard line in dealing with abusive priests, and in dealing with subsequent financial scandals that emerged. On the other hand, Lori also fought all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court to keep documents on private settlements with victims -- reached before he became bishop -- sealed. He argued his case on religious freedom grounds, but eventually lost.

But two other episodes helped shape his outlook. One was a proposal by a pair of state senators to change the structure of Catholic parishes to have lay people, rather than priests and bishops, in charge. Critics suspected it was legislative mischief prompted by Lori's vocal opposition to Connecticut's gay marriage law.

Lori rallied the state's bishops and thousands of Catholics in a public campaign against the bill, which died fairly quickly. But it provided a template for Lori's current national approach.

"If it's just bishops speaking, in a democracy, we understand that as charming and as reasonable and as innately

delightful as we all are, we'll have a better chance for a hearing when there's a lot of people out there saying, wait, this is a problem."

Another case, however, showed that Lori also knows the value of a strategic retreat. In 2007, Connecticut mandated that all hospitals provide emergency contraception to rape victims, a mandate that Lori and the other Connecticut bishops resisted much as they have the White House's current contraception mandate.

Within months, Connecticut bishops said they had undergone "an evolution in thinking" and now believed that the Plan B pill would not necessarily cause an abortion and so could be used at Catholic medical facilities.

Lori says the decision was a prudent one, based on the facts, and that the current Obama mandate is different because it includes other pills that are closer to abortion, as well as sterilizations. Despite the White House's assurances, he also doesn't believe that compromise proposals will not force the church to pay for contraception.

In that view of President Obama, Lori is voicing skepticism shared by the bishops but not necessarily their flocks. That sort of disagreement is the kind of thing that really gets his "dander up," as he said in explaining why he wrote a "nippy" response to an editorial in the Jesuit magazine America that had critiqued the bishops' wisdom in the religious freedom battle.

"I felt that an ironic -- some would say sarcastic -- little piece was a knife to cut through the fog," Lori said, relishing the memory of the exchange. "I enjoy a good piece of writing that has a bit of an edge to it, and other people do, too. We're all big boys and girls."

Lori believes that exuding joy as a bishop, not to mention displaying a sense of humor, is key to preaching the gospel. But if Lori's approach and sense of humor isn't to everyone's liking, he insists that too much is at stake to let personal feelings get in the way.

"Once you have preached the principle that a government can define a church and tell a church what to do, well, it could tell us about contraception today, it could tell us about abortion tomorrow, and physician-assisted suicide the day after that. It is the principle of the thing," he said.

"We certainly have to speak reasonably and civilly. But we also have to speak prophetically. And sometimes prophets are thought to be strident."

Source URL (retrieved on *12/12/2013 - 17:09*): http://ncronline.org/news/politics/bishops-religious-liberty-point-man-gets-promotion