

Wuerl in 1978 conclave that elected John Paul II

Jerry Filteau | Nov. 20, 2010



Cardinal-designate Donald W. Wuerl of Washington, right, talks with another prelate before the start of a meeting with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican Nov. 19. (CNS)

WASHINGTON ? With Washington's Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl joining the church's College of Cardinals Nov. 20, he becomes the only cardinal eligible to elect a pope who also participated in the 1978 conclave of cardinals that elected Pope John Paul II.

Everyone else who participated in that conclave 32 years ago is long since dead or retired.

The story of Wuerl's participation in that earlier conclave is well known among church mice like me and readily available in various books and on Internet sites, but it has been almost entirely ignored in most news stories about Wuerl's creation as a cardinal.

The Washington archbishop ? who turns 70 Nov. 12, just eight days before the consistory at which he will become a cardinal ? was a 37-year-old priest from Pittsburgh in October 1978, when Pope John Paul I died just 34 days after his election, and a second conclave within little more than a month was convened to elect his successor.

Wuerl was already distinguished as a co-author of *The Teaching of Christ*, a major 1976 text that would be one of the leading adult Catholic catechisms in English until the official Catechism of the Catholic Church was introduced almost two decades later.

Since his priestly ordination in 1966 he had been the personal secretary to Bishop John Wright of Pittsburgh and then, in Rome 1969-79, of Cardinal Wright, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy.

When Pope Paul VI died in August 1978, Wright was in the United States recovering from surgery for leg problems stemming from arthritis and other health issues; he was unable to return to Rome for the conclave later that month that elected Pope John Paul I.

When John Paul I died on the 34th day of his papacy, in the early morning hours of Sept. 29, Wright was still in the United States recovering from his surgery. But he was able to return to Rome in time for the pope's funeral

and the next conclave, which opened Oct. 14 with balloting starting the following day.

Conclave rules allow cardinals in need of medical or other assistance to bring an aide who is not a cardinal into the conclave itself.

As I wrote at the time (as then new Rome Bureau chief of Catholic News Service), Cardinal Wright, who had recently undergone leg surgery, was wheeled into the Sistine Chapel in a wheelchair by his secretary, Father Donald Wuerl, before the ceremony of entry [into the conclave] began. He and Cardinal [Jean-Marie] Villot [papal secretary of state] were the only cardinals allowed to have assistants.

Cardinal-designate Wuerl has never broken the secrecy to which he vowed about voting and other substantive matters in that 1978 conclave, but over the years he has shared non-secret anecdotes from it, such as a conversation with Cardinal Karol Wojtyla in the Vatican Gardens during the conclave, in which the imminent pope asked him to stroll together so the Polish cardinal could practice his English.

Or an incident just after the election, as reported by People magazine in March 1979, in which Wuerl was rushing down a corridor with Cardinal Wright's miter when he accidentally collided with the newly elected John Paul II. I was so confused, I didn't know what to do, Wuerl reports, so I just dropped to my knees. The pope looked at me, almost laughing, and said: What are you doing down there, Father Wuerl? Get up.??

So in a future conclave dominated entirely by appointees of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Donald W. Wuerl will be the only cardinal elector to have directly experienced a conclave electing any pope prior to Benedict XVI to me, an interesting scenario whose possible meaning in a future conclave is totally speculative.

My own first meeting with Wuerl took place just a few days after the 1978 conclave, when my predecessor in the CNS Rome Bureau arranged a courtesy visit for me with Cardinal Wright, who then was unable to get out of bed; Wuerl, who was then quietly running almost all affairs of the Clergy Congregation because of Wright's illness, was the entirely gracious and unobtrusive host facilitating the meeting. I regret that I was unaware at the time that Wuerl, like I, was a former Basselin scholar who had participated in a rather elite three-year philosophy scholarship program for seminarians at the Theological College of the Catholic University of America.

For the record, the only other new U.S.-born cardinal-designate in the next batch of cardinals Archbishop Raymond Burke, former archbishop of St. Louis and current head of the Apostolic Signature, the Vatican version of a supreme court is also a former Basselin scholar at Catholic U, whom I knew in the seminary, a few years behind me.

It would be difficult to find a greater contrast among U.S. bishops in the biggest public issue facing the U.S. church today abortion and public policy than I see between Wuerl and Burke. Wuerl seeks a path of dialogue, while Burke has headed steadfastly down an absolutist path of condemnation and denial of Communion to public figures who do not agree with some bishops' views that a total outlawing of abortion is the only orthodox Catholic position on U.S. public policy today.

Given that neither the issue of abortion nor politicians will go away anytime soon, it will be interesting to see how these very differing strategies play out in years to come.

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

Source URL (retrieved on 06/19/2013 - 14:45): <http://ncronline.org/news/wuerl-1978-conclave-elected-john-paul-ii>