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Vatican's new religious leader called pastoral, collaborative

Joshua J. McElwee | Apr. 11, 2013

The newly appointed No. 2 man at the Vatican's congregation for religious understood his last job -- leading 15,000 Franciscan friars in 113 countries in the hallowed, impoverished footsteps of 13th-century St. Francis of Assisi -- as a "sacred commitment."

Fr. José Rodríguez Carballo, the Spaniard who until April 6 served as St. Francis' 119th successor, is known as a pastoral, practical leader, qualities that should serve him well as the secretary for the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, colleagues who have worked with him say.

In one instance, said Franciscan Fr. John Hardin, Rodríguez invited a friar who was questioning his vocation to meet the superior in Rome personally to discuss the matter. Hardin, who as the missionary friar's superior was present for the discussion, said Rodríguez was "fatherly."

"Obviously [Rodríguez] wanted the guy to be able to stay," Hardin said. "But he also understood [the friar] needed to do what was best for him, for his vocation."

The interaction, Hardin said, echoed something Rodríguez had told the order's provincials in training sessions: "You hold the friars' vocation in a very sacred place -- all the friars, not just your friends, but all of your friars. That's your responsibility. This is a sacred commitment."

In some ways, Rodríguez now holds responsibility not just for 15,000 friars, but approximately 900,000 men and women around the world. The 59-year-old was announced Saturday [1] as Pope Francis' pick as second-in-command for the Vatican congregation responsible for the priests, brothers, and sisters in religious orders around the globe.

Until the announcement, the minister general of the Order of Friars Minor -- one of several orders that trace their roots to St. Francis -- Rodríguez is now the secretary for the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and will be made an archbishop May 18 in a ceremony in Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

In the role, Rodríguez will assist the head of the congregation, Brazilian Cardinal João Braz de Aviz. He replaces U.S. Archbishop Joseph Tobin, who was named archbishop of Indianapolis [2] in the fall.

Hardin, who serves as the head of the Franciscans' English-Speaking Conference, which represents friars in the United States, Canada, England, Ireland, Lithuania and Malta, said he thought his former superior would bring a "spirit of compassion" to the Vatican role and "a willingness to trump the letter of the law with the spirit of the law."

If that's the case, the new prelate's appointment could have significant impact in the United States, where his new congregation launched a controversial investigation, known as an "apostolic visitation," of individual orders of U.S. Catholic sisters in 2009.

That investigation began under Cardinal Franc Rodé, the congregation's leader before Braz de Aviz. Both Braz de Aviz and Tobin have taken a more conciliatory tone toward the sisters since, and some speculated at the time that Tobin had been moved out of the Vatican by Pope Benedict after complaints by other Vatican prelates that he had been too friendly to the sisters.

"I've worked all my life with women's religious," Tobin said at the time [2] of his appointment in August 2010. "Maybe I can offer a different picture of American women religious than the one that has been presented in Rome. My own impression is extremely positive."

Tobin told *NCR* on Tuesday that Rodríguez was a "wise choice" for the position.

Writing in an email that he had known the new congregational leader for about 10 years, Tobin said the two worked together on the governing council of the Union of Superiors General (USG), an international group based in Rome that represents male religious orders from around the world.

Tobin, a Redemptorist, served as the head of his order from 1997 to 2009 and has served as USG's vice president. The archbishop wrote that he and Rodríguez also worked together during several bishops' synods.

Rodríguez, Tobin wrote, has "years of practical experience as a director of formation and member of the government of his Order." Mentioning that the Franciscan had until his appointment as archbishop been serving as head of the USG, which elects its leaders from among its members, Tobin wrote that is evidence he is "esteemed by his peers."

"In my experience, he related very well with women religious, particularly members of the Franciscan family," Tobin continued. "He is personally modest, friendly and joyful in the best tradition of Francis of Assisi."

"I believe that the Holy See and consecrated persons will profit by this wise choice."

A final report on the visitation, which saw teams of visitors go to about 90 U.S. religious congregations for interviews and discussions, was submitted [3] to the Vatican in January 2012. It is unknown what action the Vatican has taken on the matter.

The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith undertook a separate investigation of the main representative body of U.S. sisters, known as a "doctrinal assessment," in 2009.

In April 2012, the doctrinal congregation sparked protests in the U.S. when it concluded the assessment by ordering the group [4], known as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, to revise and place itself under the authority of three U.S. bishops.

Franciscan Sr. Mary Lou Wirtz, the head of the international group that represents women religious from around the world, said while she hasn't worked closely with Rodríguez, their encounters "have been pleasant."

An American, Wirtz is president of the Rome-based International Union of Superiors General (UISG), whose some 2,000 members are heads of the various international orders of Catholic sisters.

During joint meetings of the USG and UISG, Wirtz wrote in an email to *NCR*, Rodríguez "always made significant contributions."

"I believe he brings much experience to his new position, and the fact that he is a religious is very important also," Wirtz wrote. "I certainly feel that Fr. Rodríguez' background and experience provides the groundwork for collaboration and dialogue."

Rodríguez, who holds degrees in biblical theology and sacred Scripture from Jerusalem's Studium Biblicum Franciscanum and the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, speaks Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, French and English.

Asked how Rodríguez handles potential point of tension or conflict, Hardin said the archbishop-elect is "very direct, but he's also very pastoral."

"He's very pragmatic in that sense," said Hardin, who also serves as provincial of the order's province of St. Barbara, which represents friars in the U.S. states of California, Washington, Oregon, Arizona and New Mexico. "He's got a real sense of balance when decisions have to be made in very critical areas."

"I think he would always err on the side of being pastoral as opposed to the letter of the law," said Hardin, mentioning a phrase he said had been given to him by a former provincial that he thought applied to Rodríguez: "If God is going to be angry with me, I'd rather him be angry with me for being too lenient than too harsh."

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