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Dolan's farewell; women; Russia; stuff you can't make up; and pope watch

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 15, 2013 All Things Catholic

The headline out of the U.S. bishops' meeting in Baltimore this week was the election of Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., and Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston as the new leadership team. Before turning the page, it's worth a moment's reflection on the final message launched by the outgoing leader of the pack, Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York.

Dolan devoted his last presidential address to calling the U.S. bishops to action on the persecution of Christians around the world. It was a striking emphasis, and not merely because he cited my book *The Global War on Christians* a couple of times.

Dolan's term as president will be forever linked to the domestic battles the bishops have waged on religious freedom over the last three years, especially the high-stakes and still unresolved tug-of-war with the Obama administration over contraception mandates. Precisely because he's carried so much water on that issue, Dolan's take on the broader context of religious freedom struggles packs special punch.

In his speech, Dolan ticked off some of the most intense zones where Christians are under siege today -- Nigeria; the Indian state of Orissa; China; Syria; Iraq; and Egypt. While acknowledging that members of other faiths face threats too, Dolan insisted that "Christians are singled out in far more places and far more often."

That's not just confessional hyperbole. Two-thirds of the 2.3 billion Christians on the planet today live in the developing world, often in some fairly rough neighborhoods. They're disproportionately likely to be poor and to belong to ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities, so they're doubly or triply at risk. Moreover, they're targets of convenience for anybody with a gripe against the West.

Dolan called on the American bishops to become "advocates and champions for these Christians whose lives literally hang in the balance," adding that "we dare not allow our laudable battles over religious freedom at home to obscure the actual violence being inflicted on Christians elsewhere."

After offering some specific suggestions for action -- prayer, consciousness-raising, political advocacy, and so on -- Dolan concluded with a *fervorino*.

"Protecting religious freedom will be a central social and political concern of our time, and we American bishops already have made very important contributions to carrying it forward," he said. "Now we are being beckoned -- by history, by Pope Francis, by the force of our own logic and the ecclesiology of communion -- to extend those efforts to the dramatic front lines of this battle, where Christians are paying for their fidelity with their lives."

In part, Dolan's parting shot was an effort to foster a global perspective on the church, which would be worthwhile under any circumstances and is even more apposite under the first pope from the developing world. In part, too, Dolan's call amounts to a recognition that the rise of a new generation of martyrs represents the

most urgent Christian story of our time, not to mention the most untold.

As of this week, Dolan is no longer at the helm of the conference to back those words up with action. It now falls to Kurtz and DiNardo, and they must know that legions of at-risk Christians around the world will be watching.

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A footnote to the growing interest in anti-Christian persecution: As noted below, one of the storylines out of Rome this week is progress toward a summit between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, head of the Russian Orthodox Church. Asked what the themes of such a meeting might be, a senior Russian Orthodox official pointed to "the protection of Christians in the places where they're persecuted, for example in the Middle East."

The official, who met with Francis this week, said he'd spoken with the pope about the need "to stop the massacres of Christians in places where groups of Islamic radicals are trying to exterminate them."

The comment offers a reminder that the defense of suffering Christians is not only of service to them, but it's also potentially a boon to ecumenical relations. All denominations today have their martyrs, and all are more or less equally at risk.

One factor in the growth of the ecumenical movement in the middle of the 20th century was the fellowship of suffering that Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox experienced in Nazi concentration camps and Soviet gulags. Similarly today, the shared reality of martyrdom could be a powerful force drawing the churches into a deeper spirit of common cause.

This insight is likely why Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch, the Vatican's top official for relations with other Christians, in 2011 defined the "ecumenism of the martyrs" as today's "nucleus of an ecumenical spirituality."

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Pope Francis repeatedly has called for stronger roles for women in the church, obviously wanting to kick-start a conversation about what those roles might look like. Two of the voices he's most likely to listen to on this front recently appeared on the front page of the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, with some interesting things to say.

On Monday, *L'Osservatore* carried a front-page piece titled "Women in the Church." It was penned by Lucetta Scaraffia, a widely respected correspondent and columnist who often writes on women's issues, concerning a recent interview with Maria Voce, president of the international Focolare movement.

As Scaraffia notes, the Focolare, founded by Italian laywoman Chiara Lubich, have made it a principle of their statutes that the president must be a woman. For that reason, and because the Focolare are among the largest movements, Scaraffia describes Voce as "the most eminent woman in the Catholic world."

Scaraffia argues that for too long, women were willing to accept a "subaltern" status in the church, but that today, "the situation is changing rapidly." She quotes with approval Voce's line that the church needs not only to appreciate what have been traditionally defined as "female gifts," such as the capacity to form loving relationships, but also that it must "seek out, and listen to, the thinking of women."

Three possible new roles for women emerge in the *L'Osseravtore* piece:

- A "not too small" entrance into "organisms of consultation, thought and decisions" in the church.

Presumably, though Scaraffia doesn't quite say this out loud, this implies in part more women at decision-making levels in the Vatican.
- The creation of a consultative body to the pope similar to the Council of Cardinals but composed of both laywomen and men. Such a group, Voce says, "would make me enthusiastic."
- Allowing movements such as the Focolare to incardinate priests who have been ordained elsewhere. Up to now, Voce reports, permission has been denied -- perhaps, she says, because someone is afraid of putting a priest under the authority of a woman.

"The words of Maria Voce make clear that legitimate requests for true recognition of the feminine presence in the church don't come just from groups of radicals demanding women's ordination, but from authoritative and moderate figures," Scaraffia writes.

"Behind those requests," she adds, "is certainly the majority of women who belong to the church."

Of course, the conversation about what "stronger roles" for women means won't end with this piece. As a beginning, however, it puts some interesting possibilities on the table -- and coming from the likes of Scaraffia and Maria Voce, those possibilities seem likely to be taken seriously.

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While Americans are eating turkey and watching football on Thanksgiving Day, Pope Francis will be engaging in some high-stakes diplomacy with his first meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Rome.

Though most commentary has focused on the potential of the encounter to move the ball in Catholic/Orthodox relations, especially a long-awaited meeting between the pope and the Russian patriarch, there's a political layer of subtext, too. In effect, the meeting symbolizes a recalibration of Vatican diplomacy, away from its centuries-long *de facto* alliance with the Western powers and toward a truly multipolar strategy.

During the long period when Christendom was coextensive with the West, papal diplomats thought largely in terms of which European dynasty offered the best bet for protecting the church's interests. Later, when economic and cultural change began to knit the world together, the Vatican looked to major European powers as their natural allies. After World War II, Rome put most of its eggs in the basket of the nascent European Union.

Under John Paul II, much of that natural affinity shifted to the United States, in part because of the conviction that church/state separation in America is more congenial to religion, in part because of trends within the EU toward runaway secularism. That pro-American stance, however, was to some extent a marriage of convenience, since many in the Vatican regard the libertarian streak in American culture and the congregationalist impulse in American religion as poor fits for Catholic social ethics and ecclesiology.

With Francis, the Vatican may be positioned to step outside the Western box altogether, crafting partnerships and alliances *à la carte* based on the dynamics of specific situations.

To date, the most pointed political move by Francis on the global stage was his outspoken opposition to a military intervention in Syria, expressed among other things in the global day of prayer and fasting for peace he called Sept. 7. In that effort, Francis was on the same side as Putin, squaring off against the White House, the Palais de l'Élysée in France, and other symbols of Western power.

To be sure, nobody in Rome, least of all Francis, is likely to confuse Putin with a sort of Orthodox Robert Schuman, meaning a statesman whose policies are primarily shaped by Christian values. The shortcomings of his "managed democracy" vis-à-vis Catholic understandings of subsidiarity and human rights are all too clear.

Yet the point is that when Putin and other world figures look at Francis, they're less inclined to see a Western leader, but rather the head of a global church with a predominantly non-Western following. When Francis looks at Putin, he's not automatically inclined to suspicion because he's not from the historic crucible of Christendom -- because, of course, neither is the pope.

All along, the Vatican has aspired to be a truly neutral voice of conscience in the world. The photo-op with the pope and Putin could symbolize that those aspirations are coming closer to reality.

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Speaking of a meeting between pope and patriarch, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, chairman of the Department of External Church Relations for the Russian Orthodox Church and effectively the No. 2 official under Patriarch Kirill, was in Rome for a conference Tuesday. While in town, he floated the idea of an encounter between his boss and Francis in a "neutral country."

In comments to the Italian paper *La Repubblica*, Hilarion called a meeting in a neutral venue "a great step towards which we're working with conviction."

That's as opposed to a papal visit to Russia, which many Orthodox officials still oppose on the grounds that it might stoke Catholic proselytism on what they regard as the "canonical territory" of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Though Hilarion did not present a list of acceptable sites, some speculation has pointed to Vienna, where the Patriarchate of Moscow has established a diocese and maintains an impressive cathedral. (Cynics might note that the Russians apparently didn't have any scruples about encroaching on Catholic territory in Austria, but that's a conversation for another time.) Others have suggested Hungary, at the famed abbey of Pannonhalma, or even the Italian city of Bari, where there's a significant Russian Orthodox church.

Also this week, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan was in Moscow for a meeting with Patriarch Kirill, who reportedly told the cardinal that "never before have our churches had as many things in common as they do today" and expressed the hope that "our historical disagreements will stop playing a negative role."

Later this month, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, also will be in Moscow for a conference sponsored by the Russian Orthodox Church. Paglia is a longtime stalwart of the Community of Sant'Egidio, a pioneer in Catholic/Orthodox relations.

These are encouraging signs, though a note of caution: In my experience, relations with the Russian Orthodox are among the handful of never-ending stories on the Vatican beat, along with diplomatic relations with China and reunion with the Lefebvrists. All three tend to have a "one step up, one step back" dynamic, and it's wise not to get overly excited.

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From the "You can't make this stuff up" file comes a new scandal surrounding the storied Camillian religious order, centering on accusations that its superior general cooked up a fake police investigation of two members in May in order to rig his own re-election with the covert backing of an Italian fat cat who allegedly wanted to continue cashing in on his relationship with the order.

As part of the picture, financial investigators are looking into charges that some 10 million euro, roughly $13.5 million, have been drained from Camillian hospitals in southern Italy and diverted into foreign accounts in

Switzerland.

Founded by St. Camillus de Lellis in 1582, the order is dedicated to ministry to the sick and operates an impressive network of hospitals and other health care facilities around the world. In the United States, the Camillians sponsor a sprawling assisted living and health center in Wauwatosa, Wis., a Milwaukee suburb.

On May 6, the order's worldwide leader, Fr. Renato Salvatore, was arrested in Rome on charges of having trumped up false accusations against two other Camillians scheduled to vote in a May 13 election for superior general. As a result of the charges, the two priests were hauled in for questioning on the afternoon of May 13, thus missing the ballot and, allegedly, clearing the way for Salvatore to maintain his hold on power.

Media reports have pointed to Paolo Oliveri, a powerful and well-known Italian businessman, as the possible mastermind of the affair, allegedly because Olivero wanted to be in a position to control contracts for equipment and services at facilities operated by the Camillians, especially in southern Italy.

On Wednesday, the interim leadership of the Camillians broke their public silence in an interview with *Avvenire* , the newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference. Fr. Paolo Guarise, the vicar general, pledged cooperation with the investigation so that "the truth can come to light" and "justice can take its course."

Guarise was joined in the interview by fellow Camillian Fr. Frank Monks, an Irishman who was the alternative to Salvatore in the May election. Among other things, Guarise clarified that Salvatore was re-elected by three votes, so the absence of the two members hauled in for police questioning would not have been decisive. That said, Guarise also said the order is consulting canon lawyers because of doubts about whether the vote can be considered valid and thus whether they'll have to stage another one.

Under the order's constitution, if the superior is "impeded" in exercising his role, the vicar general is obligated to call a chapter meeting to elect someone else within three years, but Guarise said they'll probably ask Vatican permission to move ahead more quickly.

In response to reports in the Italian media that Francis might name an external overseer for the order, as Benedict XVI did with the Legionaries of Christ, Monks said that on Monday he had met with Brazilian Cardinal João Bráz de Aviz, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Religious, who affirmed the order's commitment to "transparency and collaboration" with the Italian authorities. For the moment, Monks said, there's no sign the Vatican plans to appoint external leadership or to impose other controls.

Guarise also said the scandal "could have been avoided" if the order had worked better as a team, saying Salvatore "put too much trust is the wrong people, and we consultors delegated too much to him."

Undoubtedly, Francis is taking a particular interest in the affair, in part because bringing a new spirit of transparency and accountability to church finances is one tip of the spear for his broader project of reform.

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Here are two final notes from the "Pope Watch" front.

First, Francis made a visit Thursday to the Quirinale, the center of civil power in Italy (which once upon a time belonged to the papacy) to meet President Giorgio Napolitano. The pope told the president he wishes he could knock on every door up and down the country, where his own family has its roots, to offer the healing message of the Gospel, and he also urged Italy's political leadership to show special concern for the family and the jobless.

Francis made the trip across town in typically humble fashion, rejecting the traditional armed escort on horseback and sticking with a blue Ford Focus rather than a Mercedes limo. That brought yet another round of commentary from today's emerging class of would-be Savonarolas, who rarely miss a chance to skewer their local bishops for not being in sync with the new pope. One prominent Italian commentator actually suggested in *Corriere della Sera* that the Italian bishops should declare a period of public penance for their failures to be more like Francis -- i.e., less pretentious, less drunk on their own political importance, more accessible to common people, etc.

One has to wonder how long it'll take for bishops around the world to get sick of this sort of comparison. It's also food for thought whether using the pope as a cudgel to beat up on bishops in full public view will help or hinder the goal of nudging them into a more "Franciscan" mode.

Second, the archdiocese of Kampala in Uganda has launched a yearlong series of celebrations to mark the 50th anniversary of the canonization of the famed "Ugandan Martyrs" by Pope Paul VI in 1964. These were 22 young Catholics, most servants of a traditional king, who were executed in 1886 -- allegedly, in part, for spurning the king's homosexual advances. (That version of history is disputed by locals who consider themselves part of the old Buganda kingdom, which, by the way, is still a going concern, with a king and queen ruling over a swath of territory that enjoys some autonomy from the state.)

The Ugandans have invited Francis to be the principal celebrant at the concluding liturgy of the anniversary year in October 2014, to be held at the celebrated shrine of the Ugandan Martyrs, one of the main pilgrimage sites in East Africa. Paul VI visited the shrine in 1969 and Pope John Paul II did the same in 1993.

The Vatican has not confirmed that Francis will make the trip, though they might want to make a decision fairly soon. According to a newsletter published by the Ugandan episcopal conference, Archbishop Cyprian Kizito Lwanga of Kampala has already asked the government of President Yoweri Museveni to begin investing resources in preparations for the papal visit.

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