Opinion

News



Jesus Solorio, 11, carries a cross during a Eucharistic Congress procession June 17, 2017, in College Park, Ga., in the Atlanta Archdiocese. He is a parishioner of St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Alpharetta, Ga. (CNS/Georgia Bulletin/Michael Alexander)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Looking back at 2017 in the life of the Catholic Church in the United States, we can discern how the reforms introduced by Pope Francis are beginning to alter the ecclesial landscape in this country. There is still a way to go, to be sure, but the trajectory is much clearer as 2017 comes to an end than it was at the beginning of the year.

The first event was the appointment of Roy Campbell as an auxiliary bishop of Washington, D.C., in March. The appointment of an African-American auxiliary in the nation's capital came less than six months after Martin Holley, the previous auxiliary, was installed as the bishop of Memphis, Tennessee, in October 2016.



Cardinal Donald Wuerl ordains Bishop Roy Campbell as an auxiliary bishop of the Washington Archdiocese April 21, 2017, at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle. (CNS/Catholic Standard/Jaclyn Lippelmann)

That schedule is very fast by Roman standards. Rome is traditionally reluctant to give an auxiliary to an ordinary who is past the age of 70, but Washington's ordinary, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, was 76 at the time of the appointment.

While Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley is the North American representative on the Council of Cardinals that advises the pope, Wuerl has emerged as the kingmaker at the Congregation for Bishops. He is deeply respected by virtually the entire

American episcopate, and he has the confidence of Francis.

Since his replacing Cardinal Raymond Burke on the congregation in December 2013 and the arrival of a new nuncio, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, in 2016, the backlog of vacant dioceses has evaporated: As of this writing, only the Diocese of Salina, Kansas, is without a bishop.

Personnel is as important as policy in the church, often more so. Each of the new episcopal appointments reflects, in one way or another, Wuerl's commitment to selecting bishops in the pastoral mode that Francis seeks. It does not require much in the way of imagination to think of the kind of candidates who would be named bishops if Burke and Cardinal Justin Rigali were still the two Americans on the congregation instead of Wuerl and Cardinal Blase Cupich. Indeed, Cupich's transfer to Chicago in the autumn of 2014 was the first indication of the radically different episcopal appointments Francis was likely to make.

To the mat for health care

The second indicator of a change in direction came during the meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Indianapolis in June. The bishops discussed congressional efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act: The House had already passed a repeal bill, and the Senate was getting ready to debate one.

The bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice had raised substantive concerns, but some bishops, remembering that the conference had opposed the Affordable Care Act in the first place, were content to let it be repealed.

Bishop George Thomas of Helena, Montana, went to the microphone. A soft-spoken man, Thomas is on the board of the Catholic Health Association, which had broken with the U.S. bishops in 2010 and supported the law. Thomas warned of the "catastrophic effects" that would come to the nation's poor if the Republican proposals on health care and the budget were adopted.

"Our silence or our indifference would be tantamount to complicity in a very bad budget," Thomas told his brother bishops.

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Then Cupich went to the microphone and reminded the bishops of "our [Catholic] position that the state has a responsibility for creating solidarity within a country and caring for those most in need."

He was followed by Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego and then Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey.

The obviously coordinated interventions achieved their objective: Throughout the rest of the year, the bishops issued several letters to members of Congress and other public statements opposing the effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act, calling for more funding in the budget for programs that aid the poor and, most recently, raising many objections to the tax bill the GOP pushed through just before Christmas.

I certainly do not remember a time when the bishops went to the mat for legislation they originally opposed. Kudos to the Domestic Justice and Human Development Committee, led by Bishop Frank Dewane of Venice, Florida, and the committee's staff.

Defense of immigrants

The third instance of the church in the U.S. embracing Francis' agenda is the one that involves the least change: The U.S. bishops have long been united in their defense of immigrants, a defense that has become all the more urgent with the election of a president who revels in demonizing those immigrants.

The bishops' moral concern, rooted in explicit and repeated scriptural injunctions to welcome the stranger, is fortified by a demographic one: Six in 10 Catholics under the age of 18 are Latino. Not all are immigrants, but many are, and the rest are only a generation or two from being immigrants.

The dioceses in the Catholic Church that are growing — Brownsville, Texas; Dallas; Raleigh, North Carolina; Atlanta; Los Angeles; etc. — are not growing because Catholics have returned to the practice of having five or more children per family, nor because their evangelization efforts are better than elsewhere: They are growing because of immigration.

The bishops are as united on the issue of immigration as they are on the issue of religious liberty, although there is some dispute about how to prioritize each. For example, after President Donald Trump issued his travel ban against refugees and migrants from seven Muslim countries one week after taking office, the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration, like many such agencies, lit up its Twitter feed. A few weeks later, the conference had its first meeting at the White House with the new administration. The committee's Twitter feed became a trickle. I doubt it was entirely coincidental.

Free and easy dialogue

The fourth example of Francis' reforms taking effect was the conference on *Amoris Laetitia* sponsored by Boston College and the Chicago Archdiocese in early October. The conference treated the document as academic conferences usually treat such magisterial texts, looking at it from different perspectives and discussing how it relates to both previous teachings on this subject and to other areas of church teaching, like social doctrine.

It quickly became obvious that there were diverse theological opinions in the room and also obvious that none of them found the moral formation and pastoral practice that *Amoris Laetitia* calls for controversial. Put differently, the conference made obvious that the objections to *Amoris Laetitia* are confined to a noisy and organized fringe.



Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich gives Communion during Mass at Sacred Heart Church in McAllen, Texas, Aug. 15. (CNS/Courtesy of Catholic Extension)

The conference also highlighted another aspect of Francis' reforms in that it brought together theologians and bishops (and a select group of lucky journalists) in free and easy dialogue. Both in the formal discussions after each panel and in the informal discussions at coffee breaks and over meals, I did not detect any reluctance to probe and question each other, and no bishop claimed a privileged hermeneutic over the theologians in the room. One cardinal was warned not to exceed the 15-minute limit for presentations. Another could be seen guffawing over a joke told at lunch. Indeed, one archbishop explicitly told the theologians how much the hierarchy needed their work on these issues related to family life.

In short, this conference evoked the kind of easy camaraderie between bishops and theologians that characterized the Second Vatican Council. As I have observed repeatedly, the defining characteristic of Francis' reforms is their revival of both the spirit and the letter of Vatican II.

Clinging to old ways

There are still Catholics who resist those reforms because, whether they acknowledge it or not, they resist the *ressourcement* achieved by the council. Whenever there is change, some wish to cling to the old ways and the perceived certainty they provided, even when it becomes obvious to most that the cultural encrustations that are the necessary result of inculturation by previous generations cannot become a prison for the word of God.

The spiritual imperative to allow our faith to generate culture in new ways, in our time and place, is why the church continues to have councils and synods through which the church discerns the spiritual imperatives of the Gospel anew. Each time we move forward, we do so by retrieving the more ancient, foundational elements of our faith, a return to the sources.

The resistance to Francis is also rooted in the particular qualities of the U.S. church, its traditional moralism, its regrettable comfort with affluent society, and the ways it has imbibed the ambient religious culture dominated by Calvinistic memes.

That resistance will not melt easily, but it is melting. The opposition to the pope sounds more and more shrill, characterized by the kind of meanness, judgmentalism and rigidity that is antithetical to the Gospel accounts of how Jesus conducted himself when he walked the Earth.

Meanwhile, the rest of the church moves on, exhilarated at the freshness Francis has brought to the task of being a Catholic Christian in the 21st century.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about the nexus between religion and politics.]

Editor's note: Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest: Sign up to receive free newsletters, and we'll notify you when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.

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