Vatican

View from the Vatican



New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan delivers the invocation during U.S. President Donald Trump's swearing-in as the 47th U.S. president in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda in Washington Jan. 20, 2025. (OSV News/Saul Loeb, pool via Reuters)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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When Pope Francis accepted the resignation of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn on Jan. 22, the curtain came down on an ecclesial career of a churchman who played an outsized role in the last three papacies and whose ability to adjust almost seamlessly to those three very different popes was a hallmark of his legacy and longevity.

Prior to his impressive 30-year tenure as Archbishop of Vienna, the Austrian Dominican studied theology in Germany under then Fr. Joseph Ratzinger and would later be described as a spiritual son of the future pope.

During the papacy of Pope John Paul II, Schönborn was tasked with the enormous responsibility of editing the official Catechism of the Catholic Church. Over the course of the last three pontificates, he was appointed a member of almost every Vatican department and was a delegate at numerous synods. And at various points during this time, Schönborn has been floated as a possible successor to each of the three popes he's served under.

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When the Vatican daily bulletin arrived last week — making official what everyone expected — that on his 80th birthday, Francis was relieving Schönborn of his duties and allowing him to begin his retirement, I thought back to another scene from the very beginning of this papacy.

The story is recalled in Cardinal Timothy Dolan's short memoir on the 2013 conclave that elected Francis, *Praying in Rome*:

> At that Mass of Installation on March 19, I was sitting next to the archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn. The cardinal was in tears throughout the homily, and during it he turned to me and whispered,

> "Listen to him. Listen to him." At the end, when we stood up for the Creed, he said to me, "Tim, he speaks like Jesus." I said, "Chris, I think that's his job description!"

The anecdote seems especially relevant given that next week — on Feb. 6 — Dolan will turn 75 and have to submit his resignation as Archbishop of New York to Francis, as dictated under church law. It will then be up to the pope to decide when he will accept it. And here around the Vatican, there are few who are betting that he'll likely be asked to serve until his 80th birthday when, like Schönborn, cardinals lose their right to participate in a future papal conclave.

In many respects, the two men have traveled similar paths to the most powerful office in the church, except for pope. But their starkly different capacities for finding the best role for themselves in each new era is a good illustration of how real influence in the Catholic Church depends on far more than a title.



Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna is seen during a thanksgiving Mass in Vienna's St. Stephen Cathedral Jan. 18, 2025. (OSV News/Courtesy of Archdiocese of Vienna)

Both have been lauded as effective communicators with affable personalities, even through wildly different styles: Dolan, the back-slapping Midwesterner who loves the limelight and Schönborn, the gentle scholar willing to speak to anyone he encounters.

While Schönborn strikes you as someone who would have been just as happy in a university chair as an episcopal see, Dolan always seemed marked out for a place in the hierarchy.

Under John Paul and then Benedict, he went from rector of the North American College in Rome to auxiliary bishop in his native St. Louis and then archbishop of Milwaukee. Then in 2009, Benedict named him archbishop of New York, the most prominent spot in the American episcopacy. A year later, he was elected president of the U.S. bishops' conference and in 2012, Benedict named him a cardinal.

A year after that, however, the conclave elected Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina as Pope Francis. While Schönborn shed tears of joy, Dolan — fresh off of his meteoric rise to the top — seemed thrown off by a pope who did not care for anything that smacked of clerical careerism.

At various points, both prelates have been praised for being pragmatic in their approach to sensitive pastoral issues. In 2014, Dolan allowed gay groups to march in New York's storied St. Patrick's Day parade, saying that he preferred the event to be a source of "unity" rather than division. And in 2021, at a time when the Vatican explicitly prohibited priests to bless same-sex couples, Schönborn said he would not deny one if it was sincerely requested.



Pope Francis greets Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, one of the honorary patrons of the International Catholic Legislators Network, during an audience with network members at the Vatican Aug. 26, 2023. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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But critically, their paths have also diverged and an undeniable turning point was Francis' 2015 synod on the family, where among the most contentious topics under discussion was whether divorced and remarried couples could receive Communion.

At the outset of that synod, Dolan joined 12 other cardinals in signing a controversial letter authored by his longtime friend and eventual vociferous papal critic, Australian

Cardinal George Pell. The letter, sent to the pope on the synod's first day, cast suspicion over the entire gathering.

Less than a year later — when the pope's final document on the synod was released allowing for a cautious opening to Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics — Schönborn was on the dais of the Vatican's press office presenting the new text as an authentic development of magisterial teaching. Meanwhile, Dolan shrugged off the issue as not an "urgent pastoral problem."

Over the last decade of the Francis papacy, Dolan — once a longtime colossal presence on the Vatican scene who had arranged for NBC's Today show to be broadcast from St. Peter's Square and was even briefly rumored as possible successor to Pope Benedict XVI — has become a diminished figure.



Cardinal Timothy Dolan celebrates Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City Dec. 29, 2024, to mark the kickoff of the 2025 Jubilee, with similar celebrations taking place in dioceses around the world. (OSV News/Jeffrey Bruno)

Like the fate of the other cardinals who signed on to Pell's 2015 letter, the New York cardinal became viewed with wariness by Francis and his papal court. Further insult was added when, in 2020, Dolan took the unusual step of sending copies of a book reflecting on the next pope to all of the members of the College of Cardinals — a move viewed as *brutta figura* by many on the receiving end. And in recent years, Dolan has skipped out on most major gatherings for cardinals and is more regularly seen on Fox News than he is here in Rome.

In Vienna, as he began his retirement, Austria's president hailed Schönborn as a bridge-builder. Other accolades highlighted the Dominican's intellect and adaptability, even in the pages of the EWTN-owned National Catholic Register. "Schönborn's work had a massive impact on how the Catholic faith is presented, from elementary school to academic theology," read that paper's tribute.

In the United States, Dolan has also received presidential praise and recently traveled down to Washington to offer the inauguration prayers for President Donald Trump. During his first term, Trump boasted that Dolan is a "great friend." The cardinal, in turn, has joked that he spent more time on the phone with Trump than his mother and, more recently, insisted that Trump "takes his Christian faith seriously."

Time will tell if their bond remains strong. Just this week, Dolan criticized comments made by Trump's Vice President JD Vance on migration. When Vance, a Catholic, falsely claimed that the church is involved in resettling immigrants just for the money, Dolan clapped back that the allegations were "scurrilous" and "very nasty."

So while there's no obvious timeline on when Dolan might be replaced, one thing about his future seems obvious: Until another conclave produces white smoke, if Dolan is seeking influence, he'll find better odds at the White House than around here.

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