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Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, N.J., shares a moment with another cardinal during a break in the opening session of the Synod of Bishops in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 2, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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There has been little appetite historically among the College of Cardinals for the idea of a pope from the United States, a global superpower. But this conclave could be different.

Two possible papal contenders from the United States are receiving consideration, including Cardinal Joseph Tobin, archbishop of Newark, New Jersey.

At 72, Tobin's ecclesial resume is a full one — built predominantly outside of the United States, which might ease concerns by those wary of an Americentric papacy.

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Born in Detroit, the oldest of 13 children, Tobin joined the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, better known as the Redemptorists, and was ordained a priest in 1978.

The Redemptorists often describe themselves as "kitchen priests," meant to convey their willingness to get their hands dirty and not shy away from messy situations, be it in geopolitics or personal lives. Tobin, who had worked for a while as a car mechanic, seemed a natural fit for the order.

After pastoral stints in Detroit and Chicago, Tobin quickly ascended the ranks within the Redemptorists, where he eventually elected for two six-year terms as the order's superior general, from 1997 to 2009.

Although based in Rome, his missionary work as the head of the worldwide Redemptorists order took him to more than 70 countries around the globe to assess firsthand the situation of the then-5,000-plus member order. These travels — combined with his later Vatican service — means he remains a known quantity to many priests and bishops, especially in the developing world. Moreover, he's a gifted linguist, speaking (in addition to English) Italian, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

In 2005, he participated in the Vatican's Synod of Bishops on the theme of the Eucharist, where he met Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Tobin would later recall that he told the future Pope Francis that his mother was disappointed that Bergoglio was not elected pope in the 2005 conclave that elected Pope Benedict XVI. Bergoglio was reported to have been the runner-up at the time.

In 2010, Benedict appointed Tobin as the No. 2 at the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, an office responsible for overseeing the roughly 2,500 religious orders, congregations and institutes around the world.



Archbishop Joseph Tobin, then secretary of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, talks with religious after Pope Benedict XVI's vespers with members of religious orders in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Feb. 2, 2011. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Tobin's tenure in the department, however, was unusually brief, as he challenged the office's treatment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an

umbrella group representing more than 300 religious women congregations in the United States.

Tobin's office conducted an official "visitation" — an investigation — into the sisters group as part of the Vatican doctrinal office's crackdown on its theological orthodoxy. In the process, Tobin became known as a vocal defender of the religious sisters and lamented their treatment by the Vatican.

"He tried to help the Vatican understand the experience of U.S. women religious," said one sister involved in the process, who spoke to NCR on the condition of anonymity. "It was risky to do this as the new kid on the block and he paid a high price."

His willingness to buck the system made him a hero of women religious, but put him on the outs inside the Vatican. In October 2012, Benedict exiled him back to the United States to become the archbishop of Indianapolis.

His ecclesial career may have ended there if it were not for the shock resignation of Benedict just six months later and the papal election of Tobin's old acquaintance from the 2005 synod.

In October 2016, Francis announced that he was elevating Tobin to the College of Cardinals, marking the first time in its history that the small archdiocese of Indianapolis would have a cardinal.

Shortly thereafter, in November 2016, it was announced that Tobin would be transferred to Newark, New Jersey, again marking a first for a city that is a non-traditional cardinalatial see.

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In the years that have followed, Tobin has become a leading voice in favor of Francis in a deeply divided U.S. hierarchy, many of whom are considered to be out of sync with the pope's pastoral agenda.

His affable style and easy humor has won goodwill among the majority of his brother bishops, including those who are not considered to be ideological allies. Still, that wasn't enough to win a crucial 2022 vote for secretary of the U.S. bishops'

conference; Tobin lost the bid for the No. 3 position in the conference to a much more conservative candidate.

Here in Rome, Tobin is almost a monthly visitor in his capacity as a member of three Vatican offices:

- The Dicastery for Bishops, a body responsible for advising the pope on bishop appointments;
- The Secretariat for the Economy;
- The General Secretariat for the Synod.

All three are considered to be some of the Vatican's most high-profile departments, meaning he knows how the institution works (and doesn't).

When in town on Vatican business, he prefers not to lodge inside the Vatican's hotel for visiting clergy, where Francis also lived, nor at the North American College, the residence of U.S. seminarians studying in Rome where many visiting American bishops stay. Instead, Tobin chooses to stay across town at his old home at the Redemptorists' headquarters, where he is known to take the metro or bus to get around town.

If members of the College of Cardinals are looking for a candidate who shares Francis' pastoral instincts that prioritize mercy, Tobin might be appealing. He shares Francis' approach to championing of migrants; a more welcoming approach to divorced, remarried and LGBT Catholics; and a preference for a more synodal, listening church.

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As archbishop in Indiana, Tobin defied then-Gov. Mike Pence. The future vice president in the first Trump administration, Pence blocked government assistance for the resettlement of Syrian refugees and asked that Tobin not house a family in his diocese. Tobin refused Pence's request.

In New Jersey, Tobin also welcomed an LGBTQ pilgrimage to his Newark cathedral.

In a 2021 Commonweal column, he declared synodality to be antidote to racism, misogyny, clericalism, sexual abuse and other ills that have long plagued the church.

Cardinal electors also might be attracted to his own personal story of being exiled from the Vatican — a history that shares parallels with the ecclesial journeys of Popes Paul VI and Francis — as a sign that he might not govern with an iron hand.

However, Tobin might not be the choice if they are looking for a candidate who might reclaim some of Benedict's vision for a church marked by its purity and as a sign of contradiction to the world around it. They may be put off by Tobin's openness about his past alcoholism and subsequent recovery, having been sober for more than three decades.

Similarly, they might be keen to distance themselves from the scandal of the late ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, a predecessor of Tobin's as archbishop of Newark, whose serial abuse and cover-up left the archdiocese with hundreds of abuse-related lawsuits. Over the years, some conservative critics have falsely suggested McCarrick was a promoter of Tobin, although the Vatican's own investigation into McCarrick's history reveals there was no connection between the two men.

As the cardinals enter into the Sistine Chapel, if they are looking for a man deeply aligned with Francis and an experience of the global church from both the inside of the institution and its peripheries, Tobin may well end up on more than a few cardinals' short lists. But a kitchen priest — especially one from the United States — becoming pope could also remain a bridge too far.

This is part of a series on the leading candidates in the 2025 papal election. The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

This story appears in the **Who will be the next pope?** and **Papal front-runners: The men who could be pope** feature series.