

Preview of the U.S. bishops' fall meeting

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 9, 2007 All Things Catholic

[Editor's note: John Allen will be filing daily reports during the Nov. 12-15 fall meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore, Maryland. The reports will be available beginning Monday here: <http://ncrcafe.org/blog/2682> [1].]

Inevitably, the election of Cardinal Francis George as President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops next week will invite comparison to the era of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the man George followed in Chicago, and a driving force in the American bishops' conference for the better part of three decades.

The parallel is evocative not merely because both men are from the Windy City, but because both have been leading American exponents of the dominant current in the Catholicism of their day. Bernardin embodied the era of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), pushing the church to embrace what he saw as the best of secular modernity. George, on the other hand, reflects the more evangelical outlook associated with John Paul II and Benedict XVI, focused on reclaiming a strong sense of Catholic identity and concerned that the church not end up, in the famous phrase of Jacques Maritain, "kneeling before the world."

It would be misleading and unfair to style this as a contrast between a "liberal" Bernardin and a "conservative" George. Bernardin was deeply rooted in tradition, and George is nobody's idea of a reactionary. In a recent interview with *NCR*, he stressed that there can be no return to the past; the search for new models of Catholic identity, he said, has to be "developed naturally in relationship to today's crisis."

Yet there is a difference. Many historians say the two great impulses that produced Vatican II were *aggiornamento*, meaning bringing things up to date, and *ressourcement*, or a return to the wellsprings of tradition, and theologians will tell you that ultimately the two belong together. Nonetheless, in different periods one may wax and the other wane; synthetically, one could say that Bernardin leaned to the *aggiornamento* end of the equation, while George inclines a bit more to *ressourcement*.

Beyond this personal contrast, though certainly related to it, there's also a difference between the conference itself in the Bernardin era and the body that George will inherit. Over the last decade, the conference has experienced three important realignments in its theology, operations, and structures.

Theological: Pope John Paul II, in his 1998 document *Apostolos Suos*, ruled that bishops' conferences cannot issue authoritative teaching unless they're unanimous or they have the prior approval of the Holy See. The idea was to emphasize that a bishops' conference is not a new layer of authority between the pope and the individual bishops, thereby encouraging bishops to exercise their own judgment rather than submitting to a kind of group-

think. One example of that policy was the diversity of responses from American bishops witnessed in 2004, which will likely recur in 2008, over the issue of communion for pro-choice Catholic politicians. While most bishops still feel a strong psychological tug in favor of presenting a unified front, it's become more difficult to use the conference as a means for achieving (and, perhaps the critical point, enforcing) that unity.

Operations: Those frustrated with the conference in the '80s and '90s sometimes complained that the bishops didn't seem to be in charge, but instead were taking their cues from staff and advisors. One oft-cited case in point, for those who hold this view, was a 1998 document addressed to the parents of homosexuals titled "Always our Children," issued by a subcommittee of the conference with the approval of the Administrative Committee, but widely perceived as a collective statement of "the bishops." Part of the logic for the recent restructuring of the conference, with parallels to similar shakeups in other bodies of bishops such as the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, has been to ensure that decisions and documents are truly the work of the bishops, rather than reflecting somebody else's agenda.

Structures: The elimination of some 60 jobs at the conference along with parallel cuts in the number of committees, approved by the bishops last year and taking full effect in 2008, reflect a financial squeeze on the American church created by payouts related to the sexual abuse crisis, the transition to salaried lay ministers in the place of priests and nuns, rising costs of pensions and health care, and a host of other factors. When the dust settles, the conference will have a depleted staff in such critical areas as bioethics, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, and outreach to various cultural and ethnic groups.

The net result is a conference forced to rein in its ambitions and to sharpen its focus. Optimists argue that the changes will produce a "leaner, meaner" conference, one in which the bishops feel a greater sense of ownership, and in which work is developed collaboratively rather than in self-contained bureaucratic compartments. Skeptics, on the other hand, fear the actual result will be an "incredible shrinking conference," receding as a major force in broader cultural and political affairs, devoting its limited resources largely to insider church baseball.

Bernardin succeeded in moving the levers of power within the bishops' conference to make it an effective instrument of American *aggiornamento*. The question now is whether another cardinal from Chicago will be able to similarly animate the conference as a vehicle for *ressourcement* -- using more limited means, and, to some degree perhaps, moving towards different ends.

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One key item on the bishops' agenda in Baltimore is a new version of the document "Faithful Citizenship," intended to represent their collective contribution to American political debate heading into the 2008 elections. The conference has produced such a document for the last 30 years, but this time it's being submitted to the full body of bishops for debate and a vote.

Anyone familiar with the recent track record of Catholic political engagement in the United States knows that it sometimes suffers from a curious sort of bipolar disorder. "Peace and justice" Catholics tend to emphasize issues such as poverty, health care, the environment, and war, often invoking Bernardin's image of a "seamless

garment" of social concerns. "Pro-life" Catholics, on the other hand, generally concentrate on what one rival Catholic voter's guide refers to as the five "non-negotiables": abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, cloning and gay marriage.

In that clash, "Faithful Citizenship" has often been read as shading towards the seamless garment perspective, making it something of a *bête noire* for Catholics who emphasize the pro-life issues; one widely read Catholic blog, for example, has referred acidly to "the USCCB's seemingly long term partnership with the party of death."

Responding to such perceptions, the new draft of "Faithful Citizenship" attempts to hold together two propositions:

- Catholic teaching requires concern wherever human dignity is at stake, from protecting unborn life to feeding the hungry and welcoming immigrants;
- Within that range of issues, pride of place must go to the right to life.

The draft warns of two "temptations" to be avoided.

"The first is a moral equivalence that makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity," it says. "The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life is always wrong and is not just one issue among many." The second temptation, the draft says, "is the misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity," citing racism, the death penalty, unjust war, torture and war crimes, hunger and health care, and unjust immigration policies.

Based on these considerations, the draft offers what to some observers may seem a candidate for understatement of the year: "Catholics may feel politically disenfranchised, sensing that no party and too few candidates fully share the church's comprehensive commitment to the dignity of the human person."

None of this is really new, although the current draft of "Faithful Citizenship" accents the primacy of the life issues more clearly than previous editions. What is perhaps most noteworthy about the draft is less its substance than the process behind it; for the first time, it has been generated not just by the Committees on Domestic and International Policy, long seen as the bailiwicks of the peace-and-justice folk, but also by the Committees on Doctrine and Pro-Life Activities. Both were extensively involved in drafting and editing the text. That's intended to send a clear message that this is not just the document of one wing of the church, but of the bishops as a whole.

To borrow an ecumenical metaphor from Pope John Paul II (who himself borrowed it, by the way, from Russian poet and Catholic convert Vyacheslav Ivanov), the attempt seems to be to encourage the church in 2008 to "breathe with both lungs" in the political arena.

The decision to bring the document to the floor for a vote is a calculated roll of the dice. There may be proposals

for amendments to strengthen the language on abortion and other life issues, or to emphasize that matters such as economic justice or immigration leave greater scope for prudential judgment. The document requires a two-thirds vote to pass, and there may be some anxious moments when it comes time to count noses.

Nonetheless, the draft of "Faithful Citizenship" at least represents an intriguing effort to put two oft-estranged Catholic constituencies back on speaking terms.

One final point worth making is that the draft spells out the reasons why the church does not endorse specific candidates, stating that the role of the bishops is to form consciences, but it remains the task of "each individual Catholic" to make voting decisions.

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Other noteworthy items on the agenda include:

Money: The conference will consider a requirement for bishops to obtain approval from their diocesan finance council and college of consultors for five specific financial decisions: 1) Going into debt beyond \$1 million for a diocese with more than a half-million Catholics, and \$500,000 for dioceses with smaller populations; 2) legal settlements exceeding those same amounts; 3) running a business not directly related to the spiritual or charitable purposes of the church; 4) any contract or agreement that involves a potential conflict of interest for the bishop or other senior diocesan officials; 5) going into bankruptcy. On a related front, Bishop Daniel Walsh of Santa Rosa, Calif., will make a presentation on the importance of parish audits. (Walsh is an appropriate choice, having taken over in Santa Rosa in 2000 after the former bishop, Patrick Ziemann, left a \$17 million debt amid a track record of suspect money management). The discussion reflects a series of recent financial headaches for the church -- including, for example, an estimated \$36 million spent by the Detroit archdiocese on the under-utilized John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, and a 2007 survey by Villanova University that found 85 percent of American dioceses reporting some embezzlement of church funds within the last five years.

Sex Abuse: Researchers from John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Fordham University (both in New York) will present preliminary results of their study of the causes and context of the sexual abuse crisis. Among other things, the findings are expected to offer a contrast between the periods 1960-1990 and 1990-2002, suggesting that the number of incidents declined and the aggressiveness of the church's response improved in the latter period. The bishops have already spent \$1 million on the study and expect to eventually allocate \$2 million, with the project slated for completion in 2009. The results will be keenly anticipated, since the underlying causes of the sex abuse crisis remain a matter of keen Catholic debate.

Marriage: The bishops will review a new series of public service announcements and a Web site (www.foryourmarriage.org [2]) intended to promote traditional marriage and the family structure. The efforts are part of a "National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage" approved in 2004. (The PSAs feature a series of couples answering the question, "What have you done for your marriage today?", such as a woman who says she got her husband mustard and mayonnaise for his sandwich.)

Youth: The bishops will review a new brochure on stewardship aimed at youth, encouraging young people to

make good use of their gifts. The campaign includes an appeal for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The conference will also consider two new catechetical documents for young people, one laying out a broad curriculum for faith formation and the other targeted specifically at formation in "chaste living."

Music: The longest document on the agenda is a 22,000-word text on liturgical music titled "Sing to the Lord," which, if passed, will have the force of church law in the United States. It would replace two earlier documents on music, "Music in Catholic Worship" and "Liturgical Music Today." One aim seems to be to promote more traditional and reverential music in the Mass, such as Latin hymns and Gregorian chant. The bishops' office for liturgy solicited input from 50 different organizations in developing the document. On other liturgical matters, the bishops will consider a text for "Weekday Celebrations of the Liturgy of the Word," for situations where no priest is available to say Mass, and revisions to Scripture readings for Sundays in Lent. It does not appear that the bishops will receive any update on the five *dubia* (meaning "questions") they submitted to the Vatican about Pope Benedict XVI's recent document liberalizing permission for the Latin Mass in use prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Among other things, the Vatican was asked to clarify whether the old rite can be used during Holy Week, including controversial Good Friday prayers for the conversion of the Jews. The current thinking in Rome is that the Vatican's Ecclesia Dei Commission, charged with responsibility for the old Mass, may prepare a document based on the *dubia* received from various parts of the world, but there's no clear sense yet of when that document might appear.

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Finally, the bishops will also elect new officers. With the choice of George as president a foregone conclusion, the drama will focus on the race for vice-president, since that person will be in line to succeed George in three years as president.

The candidates are:

- Bishop Gregory M. Aymond of Austin, Texas
- Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of Milwaukee
- Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Arizona
- Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky
- Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Connecticut
- Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia
- Bishop Dennis M. Schnurr of Duluth, Minnesota
- Bishop Donald W. Trautman of Erie, Pennsylvania
- Bishop Allen H. Vigneron of Oakland, California

As always, the results will be scrutinized for indications of which way the winds are blowing. Though this sort of political calculus is terribly crude, the election of someone like Trautman would be seen by some as a victory for the "center-left" faction, while Vigneron or Rigali would appeal more to the "center-right."

Ideology, of course, is only one of many factors as bishops weigh their options. Another is who's best equipped to act as a public voice for the church in the United States, and in that regard, some observers feel Dolan may

have an edge. The former rector of the North American College in Rome, Dolan is without peer among his brother bishops in terms of his capacity to work a room. To some extent, the gift of gab is in his gene pool; his brother Bob Dolan is a popular radio and TV personality in Milwaukee. Dolan's charisma is one reason many church insiders regard him a strong candidate to become the next Archbishop of New York, perhaps the ultimate "big stage" in American Catholicism.

Kicanas, however, is no slouch himself in the wit department. On Monday of this week I was in Tucson, giving two presentations to the priests of the diocese along with a public lecture in the evening, all held in the gorgeous Redemptorist Renewal Center at Picture Rocks. Despite a busy schedule and a nagging cold, Kicanas spent most of the day with us. At one point, he told the priests that he had recently been in Jerusalem as part of a pilgrimage group, where he made a stop at the famed Western Wall. While there, Kicanas said, a man approached him and asked if he could pray over him.

"Of course," Kicanas responded.

"Brother, what is the name of your wife?" the man asked.

Clearly dressed in clerical garb, the startled bishop responded, "Oh, I'm not married."

Draping Kicanas in his prayer shawl, the man then boomed out, "Dear Lord, please grant this man a wife!"

With a gleam in his eye, Kicanas wrapped up the anecdote by telling his priests: "I guess we'll see."

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Normally speaking, the election of committee chairs does not arouse the same level of interest, but this time one race in particular will be closely watched. The two candidates to lead the Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance are Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis and Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Chicago.

Burke has been perhaps the strongest voice among the American bishops calling for a tough stance on giving communion to pro-choice Catholic politicians. In a recent essay in the canon law journal *De Re Canonica*, Burke argued that the church has emphasized canon 916, which deals with the duty of the individual communicant to make a decision about their worthiness, at the expense of canon 915, which states that those who "obstinately persist in manifest grave sin" are not to be admitted.

Burke served from 1989 to 1994 as the Defender of the Bond in the Apostolic Signatura, the church's equivalent of the Supreme Court. In 2006, Benedict XVI made Burke a member of the Signatura. In that light, many bishops could vote for Burke on the basis of his expertise as a canonist, even if they don't share his stand on the communion issue in all its particulars. Nevertheless, the election of Burke might be interpreted publicly as an endorsement of that position.

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