

Religious-order bishops are a long but contested tradition

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 17, 2009



Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, left, and Chicago Cardinal Francis George wait for Pope Benedict XVI to arrive at the White House in April 2008. Bertone is a Salesian and George an Oblate of Mary Immaculate. (CNS)

Few dioceses in the world have ever needed a breath of fresh air quite like Boston in early 2003, after the embattled Cardinal Bernard Law finally resigned amid a meltdown driven not only by the wider sex-abuse crisis, but also by Law's own imperious, polarizing style.

When Bishop Sean O'Malley was introduced as Law's successor, everything about him seemed to scream "change": his bearded, beaming visage, his accessibility, his air of humility. The exclamation point came with O'Malley's garb. Instead of French cuffs and other finery, he wore the simple brown robe of the Capuchin friars, the religious order he had joined while growing up in Pennsylvania in the 1950s.

That splash of Franciscan humility was a badly needed tonic, and it also threw a spotlight on a practice that gained new prominence during the papacy of John Paul II: plucking bishops out of the ranks of religious orders, especially for high-profile dioceses not confined to "mission" territories.

To be sure, it's not a touch that plays to universal acclaim. Critics charge that at least in the West, naming religious-order priests as bishops is an anomaly -- it's arguably an insult to the local clergy, critics say, as if none of them were worthy, and can also be disruptive to religious life. Such judgments often cause eyes to roll in Rome and among the papal nuncios, or ambassadors, whose job it is to do the legwork for episcopal nominations. Don't name anybody from a given order, nuncios often say, and the religious will complain that Rome doesn't like them; do name somebody, and they'll grumble that Rome doesn't understand them.

Whatever one makes of naming religious as bishops, the reality is that it's almost certain to continue. In a time when the number of priests is going down, at least in some parts of the world, but the number of bishops is going up, church officials trawling for prelates will face growing pressure to cast the widest possible net.

Nothing more traditional

Historically, there's nothing more traditional than a monk-bishop. Several early popes came out of monasteries, and during the high Middle Ages, most of the celebrated reforming popes were former monks. In the Eastern churches, which never developed an expectation of celibacy for rank-and-file clergy, the tradition continues to this day. Ordinary pastors are married, while bishops are chosen from among the celibate monks.

In the Latin rite, however, a more rigid wall of separation grew up between religious life and diocesan ministry. In part, the logic is practical: No order wants to lose a good member for the rest of his career, especially if the guy has already shown leadership potential.

More deeply, some experts on consecrated life say it's a different animal from ministry in a local church, as it is premised on a lifetime commitment to prayer, community and service to an order's "charism," or mission. While few dispute that religious orders should be willing to occasionally "take one for the team," many religious argue that a situation in which bishops routinely come from their ranks risks injecting notes of ambition and impermanence where they don't belong.

Even some bishops from religious orders concede it's not the best of all possible worlds.

"All things being equal, I think it's better for religious to serve their purpose, which is not to be bishops but to live their charism clearly and in a contemporary way," said Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, a Capuchin who went to seminary with O'Malley back in the 1950s and '60s, and who remains a close friend.

"On the other hand," Chaput said with a laugh, "being a bishop is one of most important roles in church. If the church needs guys from religious orders — well, if I were making the decision, I guess I'd take 'em too."

Not long ago, the rule of thumb was that in the rare instances when religious priests became bishops in the Latin rite, it would be in missionary areas those orders served, such as Africa, Asia and the Pacific Islands. In those regions, naming a religious was often seen as an interim step while waiting for the local clergy to mature. (Chaput points out that this is how he and O'Malley got started: O'Malley's initial posting was in the Virgin Islands, and Chaput was first named the bishop of Rapid City, S.D., partly to serve the Native American community. Chaput is of mixed French Canadian and Potawatomi Indian ancestry.)

Many church watchers believe that John Paul II broke this pattern, turning to members of religious orders more routinely, though it's not clear how accurate that perception really is.

In the United States, despite the fact that over a quarter-century John Paul appointed the vast majority of the country's bishops, less than 10 percent today come from religious communities. (The precise number is 23 out of 243 non-retired bishops in the Latin rite, or 9.5 percent.) They include two cardinals, O'Malley and Francis George of Chicago (an Oblate of Mary Immaculate), as well as three archbishops: Jerome Hanus of Dubuque, Iowa, and Daniel Buechlein of Indianapolis, both Benedictines, and Roger Schwietz of Anchorage, Alaska, an Oblate like George.

Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese once calculated that, worldwide, 25 percent of new bishops named by John Paul during the 1980s came from religious orders. Though no one has tracked it carefully, indications are that this number is probably only marginally higher than popes before and since. In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI made a total of 221 episcopal nominations, of which 42 went to religious, meaning 19 percent. (Globally, the 136,000 priests in religious orders account for a third of the total number of 405,000 priests.)

Nor was John Paul the first to name religious-order priests to highly visible dioceses in the West. Under Pope Pius XI (1922-39), for example, the all-important dioceses of Milan and Venice in Italy, and Paris, France, were led, respectively, by a Benedictine, a Carmelite and a Sulpician. Later, Pope Paul VI named the Benedictine

abbot Basil Hume as archbishop of Westminster in England.

It may be that bishops from religious orders today turn heads not because of their numbers, but their prominence. Two years ago, George of Chicago became the first bishop from a religious order to be elected president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. With the recent election of Bishop George Murry of Youngstown, Ohio, a Jesuit, as secretary, two of the four most senior positions in the conference are now held by bishops from religious orders.

In the Vatican, the second most powerful official after the pope himself is also a religious: Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, a Salesian who serves as secretary of state. Ironically, the Congregation for Clergy, which oversees the affairs of diocesan priests worldwide, is also now led by a religious: Cardinal Cláudio Hummes, a Franciscan from Brazil.

Pros and cons

Most observers tick off a similar set of pros and cons about naming a religious as a bishop.

In the "pro" column, it means there are some members of the episcopacy with a direct experience of religious life, perhaps giving them a deeper appreciation for its dynamics -- including its prophetic role in the church, as well as the "true autonomy of life" promised by canon 586.1, but sometimes, cynics say, more honored in the breach than the observance.

Franciscan Sr. J. Lora Dambroski, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, pointed to another possible upside: breadth of vision.

"Bishops who come from international congregations often have a broader sense of the church, because they've had that breadth in their own communities," she said. "Even if they're from a national congregation, it still spans coast to coast, as opposed to focusing just on the local diocese."

Bishops from religious orders can also sometimes be of help informally to their old communities. American Fr. Joseph Tobin, superior of the Redemptorist order, said that when one of his Spanish theologians was under investigation, he consulted Redemptorist bishops in Latin America to find out if the heat was coming from that part of the world. Tobin said that they were able to tell him, off the record, that the problem was in Spain.

On the other hand, some observers say that bishops who come out of religious orders may be so concerned about appearances of partiality that they end up actually being tougher on religious life, making their nomination something of a mixed bag.

"Sometimes they can hold religious to another level of responsibility, even calling us to task," Dambroski said. "Maybe it's because they expect more from us."

Though much depends on individual personalities, observers also say that bishops with a background in religious life may take a distinctive approach to governance, shaped by the more democratic ethos of religious communities.

"In general, our bishops would not be into the model of a benevolent despot or a monarch," Tobin said. "They basically buy into consensus and collaborative working."

On the downside, the most practical problem for religious orders is that gaining a bishop always means losing a member at a time when in some parts of the world membership is already in decline. Compounding the problem, Tobin said, is that usually it's religious with the greatest capacity for administration who attract

attention as possible bishops.

Chaput pointed to another tension, which is that religious priests accustomed to living in community often find themselves on their own as bishops. When he arrived in Denver, he thought about living with the local Capuchin community, but decided against it since his primary identification is supposed to be with the diocesan clergy. Other attempts to build community, he said -- such as an informal men's group that has a monthly dinner at Chaput's residence -- are only a partial substitute.

"Whatever community you put together is just there to serve you," Chaput said. "You're not really available to serve them, so there's no mutuality."

Anyway, Chaput said, being the boss inevitably distorts the experiment.

"You can't ever just be one of the priests," he said. "The charism of bishop is so dominant that it just takes over."

Tobin jokingly notes that not every bishop from a religious order keeps up friendships with his former confreres. He told the story of a Redemptorist who served as a bishop in Brazil, keeping the order at arm's length by stressing that his boss was the pope. After he stepped down, Tobin said, the bishop wound up in a Redemptorist-run retirement center, and at one point insisted that the regional provincial assign him a car.

Tobin said the provincial's temptation was to reply, "Why don't you go ask the pope?"

Whatever one makes of the practice, most observers agree that naming religious as bishops is likely to continue, if for no other reason than simple arithmetic. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the total number of priests in the Catholic church has declined from 420,000 to 405,000, but the number of bishops has almost doubled, from 2,500 to 4,500.

In other words, popes today have to find twice as many bishops from a shrinking pool of priests. As a result, and with apologies for the pun, taking bishops out of religious orders is a habit that will prove hard to break.

John L. Allen Jr. is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.

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Based on lists provided by the Catholic Hierarchy Web site (www.catholic-hierarchy.org), the following are the top 10 orders in the church in terms of the total number of bishops, including both bishops who are currently serving and those who are retired:

Salesians	
Order of Friars Minor	120
Capuchins	108
Jesuits	92
Society of the Divine Word	92
Benedictines	49
Redemptorists	46
Oblates of Mary Immaculate	46
Dominicans	45
Conventual Franciscans	37
	18

As prelates, Salesians take the lead

Once upon a time, the leaders of the pack among religious orders that produced bishops were the Franciscans, with the Jesuits, Dominicans and Benedictines not far behind. In part, that's because of the ubiquity of those orders in the missions, and in part due to their rich theological and pastoral heritage.

In recent decades, however, the balance has shifted. Today, the Salesians of St. John Bosco hold a clear pride of place. There are now 120 Salesian bishops in the world, giving them more than the Dominicans and Benedictines combined, and placing them well ahead of both the Franciscans and the Jesuits. The top Vatican official after the pope himself is a Salesian: Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the secretary of state.

It should be noted, however, that if one adds together the three main branches of the Franciscan family -- the Friars Minor, the Capuchins and the Conventuals -- their combined total is 218, still far more than any other tradition.

The favorable wind at the Salesians' back is clear from the College of Cardinals. The Jesuits still have nine cardinals to the Salesians' five, but only two Jesuits are under 80 and hence eligible to vote for the next pope, while four Salesians are electors. Making this ascendancy all the more remarkable, the order was only founded in the middle of the 19th century.

Most observers attribute the rapid growth in Salesian bishops to two factors:

The order's charism, which is focused on education and ministry in parishes, making Salesians more likely candidates to become leaders in a diocese;

The culture of the order, which is less given to theological exploration than, say, the Jesuits and Dominicans. As a result, Salesian priests are more likely to have a clean bill of health in Rome.

-- *John L. Allen Jr.*

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