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Former doctrinal aides shape Pope Benedict's papacy

by John L. Allen Jr.



Bishop Zygmunt Zimowski (CNS photo)

During the John Paul years, Vatican insiders talked about a "Polish mafia" in Rome, meaning a cluster of Poles who wielded influence on the late pope. Four years into the reign of Benedict XVI, there's no analogous gang of Germans, but the pope has quietly assembled another sort of posse: Former aides from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger ran the show for 24 years.

With tongue firmly planted in cheek, one might say that instead of a Polish mafia, Benedict is now surrounded by his "Holy Office homeboys."

(The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's top doctrinal agency, was once called the "Holy Office, and around Rome it's still a common shorthand.)

On April 18, Benedict XVI named Bishop Zygmunt Zimowski of Radom, Poland, to succeed Mexican Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán as President of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Health Care Workers. Zimowski worked in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1983 to 2002; when he went home to become a bishop, Ratzinger travelled to Poland for the consecration ceremony.

Zimowski's appointment brings to four the number of important Vatican offices run by former Ratzinger aides:

- The Secretariat of State, headed by Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who served as Ratzinger's deputy from 1995 to 2002;
- The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, led by American Cardinal William Levada, who worked under Ratzinger in the early 1980s and later became a bishop member of the congregation;
- The Congregation for the Causes of Saints, led by Archbishop Angelo Amato, who served as a consultant to the CDF before replacing Bertone as Ratzinger's deputy from 2002 until 2008;
- The Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Health Care Workers, how presided over by Zimowski.

The number rises to five if one also includes the Pontifical Council for the Laity, where Ratzinger's former private secretary and close friend, Bishop Josef Clemens, is the number two official.

As for Zimowski, the pope's affection has long been clear. The two men took a helicopter together from Warsaw to Radom for the consecration in 2002, where the future pope said in his homily, "You know how much we in Rome awaited this day. We were all convinced that this was the will of God, to confer on you such a responsibility in the church." In turn, one of Zimowski's first acts as bishop was to establish a center for doctoral and post-graduate study of Ratzinger's theology at a local university.

It is also thanks to Zimowski that the world learned of the pope's fondness for pancakes with marmalade, an insight Zimowski gleaned while travelling with Ratzinger in the Tyrol, and which he revealed in an interview with Polish journalists shortly after his mentor's election to the papacy.

At first blush, Benedict's preference to entrust important posts to people he knows might seem like little more than common sense. Moreover, at 82, the pope is probably disinclined to spend time adjusting to the personalities and rhythms of complete unknowns.

Yet in the culture of the Vatican, all this does have broader significance.

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Traditionally, the Roman Curia has been a blend of two kinds of personalities, symbolized by two ultra-powerful departments: the Secretariat of State, composed of diplomats; and the Holy Office, populated by the guardians of orthodoxy. The former tend to prize flexibility, pragmatism, and moderation; the latter put a premium on clarity and solid roots in traditional Catholic identity. The default question of the diplomats tends to be how the church can explain itself to the outside world, while the Holy Office's main concern is generally that the church stays true to itself.

Since the era of Pope Paul VI, the consensus has been that the Secretariat of State held the upper hand in the corridors of power. Admirers believe that arrangement afforded the Vatican a realistic view of the world, and a capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. Critics say it sometimes fudged core matters of Catholic identity.

However one slices it, the reality is that Pope Benedict's "Holy Office homeboys" are now in the ascendant. On balance, that implies a Vatican team more focused on ensuring that the church follows her own logic and speaks her own language, rather than adapting to the psychology and argot of secular modernity.

One consequence is that, at times, Vatican decisions and statements may be more opaque to people who aren't steeped in the thought-world of the church ? an insight that may go a long way towards explaining the Vatican's recent difficulties in explaining papal moves such as reviving the old Latin Mass, or lifting the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops, including one who is a Holocaust denier.

Zimowski takes over the Vatican's top job for health at a moment in which relations with secular circles seem especially tense, especially in the wake of a European furor related to Benedict XVI's comments on condoms and AIDS en route to his recent swing in Africa. Three days before Zimowski's appointment was announced, Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Vatican's foreign minister, received the ambassador to the Holy See from Belgium, who delivered an official protest against the pope's comments adopted by the Belgian parliament.

A testy note released later that day by the Secretariat of State complained of an "unprecedented media campaign" against the pope in Europe, based upon selective quotations that it called "truncated, isolated and lifted out of context." The statement said that the full version of the pope's comments indicate a two-pronged approach to AIDS: first, the "humanization of sexuality," and second, "friendship and presence for suffering people." That position, the statement asserted, has been "appreciated by Africans and by true friends of Africa."

Among other challenges, Zimowski thus inherits the task of defending Catholic teaching on reproductive health in a European context marked by increasing skepticism and, at times, overt opposition. His success may depend on how well he's able to blend his training and experience in the Holy Office with a little bit of diplomacy too.

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