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A light-hearted media session with new American archbishops

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Rome

Here's the thing about a pallium ceremony, the annual event in Rome when new archbishops receive a band of woolen cloth symbolizing their duties as shepherds and their bond with the pope: It rarely makes much news, but it does offer a snapshot of the next generation of senior leadership in the Catholic church.

That's especially true this time around with respect to the United States. The five American archbishops who received the pallium this morning from Pope Benedict XVI range in age from 59 to 65, meaning they're likely to play key roles for at least the next decade and a half. One, Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, is a slam-dunk to become a cardinal, and it's possible that two others — Archbishops Allen Vigneron of Detroit and Robert Carlson of St. Louis — could become cardinals in their present assignments too, though Catholic demographics these days might make that difficult.

The five are:

• Gregory Aymond, 59, New Orleans

• Robert Carlson, 65, St. Louis

• Timothy Dolan, 59, New York

• George Lucas, 60, Omaha

• Allen Vigneron, 60, Detroit

Whether all five will stay where they are for the long haul remains to be seen, but certainly all five

represent rising stars who will have much to say about the course of American Catholicism in the early 21st century.

As a footnote, today's crop is also likely to be read as further confirmation of the influence of Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia in the bishop-making process. Rigali is a former archbishop of St. Louis, and two of the new archbishops -- Dolan and Lucas -- are both priests of St. Louis.

After the close of this morning's ceremony, the five Americans met with reporters in a very brief session (ten minutes, with just two questions) at the North American College, where American seminarians in Rome reside, ahead of a reception in the NAC courtyard. These events are designed to be quick, up-beat and a bit sentimental, and certainly there were no headlines. The mood among the new archbishops seemed light-hearted, especially about the experience of sitting inside St. Peter's Basilica for a three-hour liturgy on a hot Rome day while wearing several layers of vestments.

The following is a transcript of this afternoon's session.

Media Session with New American Archbishops

North American College, Rome

June 29, 2009

Dolan: I'm so happy to be next to Archbishop Carlson, because he perspires more than I do! I was so happy to see the Holy Father too [sweating] ? I felt like I was in solidarity with him.

Vigneron: Archbishop Dolan, the Holy Father ?dews? ? he doesn't ?perspire?! [This was a joking reference to lengthy debates within the U.S. bishops' conference in recent years about use of the phrase ?dew of your Spirit? in the new English translation of the Order of Mass.]

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Dolan: Anytime I'm in St. Peter's, and of course I had the opportunity to serve as rector here [at the North American College] for seven years, I just find it a living mosaic of the unity and the diversity of the church. You see the diversity in all the different languages, the different dress, the peoples from all over the world. Yet there's also the cohesion of the church, as we all pray the Creed together, as we're united with the successor of St. Peter, and we're united with Jesus in his eternal sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to his father at the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

You know, this is the second time for me. I was able to receive the pallium when I became the archbishop of Milwaukee. That double bond ? first of all, the pallium is wool of the sheep, so you think of the sheep around the shoulders of Jesus, the good shepherd. Secondly, it's a harness. If you look at it, it's a harness, it's a yoke, and it binds me to Jesus and to his vicar here on earth, the successor of St. Peter, the pope. Now that I have my second one, I almost grow in my appreciation. It almost strikes me as somewhat of a wedding ring, that we are intimately bound to our people, our sheep, after the heart of Jesus the good shepherd, and we're also bound to the universal pastor of the church, Pope Benedict XVI.

Enough of the sermon ? but I'm thrilled because we had so many great people from the archdiocese of New York. [Roughly 180 New Yorkers made the trip to Rome for the pallium ceremony.] I leave it up to you ? who got the loudest cheer today? I didn't want to say it, but ?

Vigneron: Syracuse! [A reference to Archbishop Salvatore Pappalardo of Syracuse, located in Sicily,

who also appeared to have a large following].

Dolan: It's great to have you brothers here. When I got it for Milwaukee, I think I was the only American. One more thing: If all those archbishops who said to me today that they're going to come visit me actually do, I'm in trouble. I'll have about forty guests.

Carlson: This is my twenty-fifth year as a bishop, and it was a wonderful opportunity during the Mass to pray for tremendous people who have crossed the path of my life over the years. Interestingly, this is my fourth diocese ? I've had a really hard time holding a job, but hopefully St. Louis will give me some stability. I prayed for those people who have touched me so deeply and to be present for this celebration.

In a certain way, this is a St. Louis event, because both Archbishop Dolan and Archbishop Lucas are priests of the archdiocese of St. Louis. It's a privilege to be with them and my good friend, Archbishop Greg Aymond. It was a very deeply moving experience and moment of faith for me. As I reflect on the faith of the people of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, I feel very privileged to be there.

Aymond: It was a very powerful event for me. I never dreamed that this day would happen. As Archbishop Dolan mentioned, it was very powerful to see the church in its diversity and also its universality, to see bishops from literally around the world, and also to have that connectedness with the Holy Father ? wearing a pallium similar to his, and that opportunity to pledge again loyalty and obedience and respect to him as the vicar of Christ. It's just a very powerful and touching event.

It was a privilege for me to be able to represent the people of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, as a native son, to kneel before the Holy Father and to receive his blessings. Thank you all for being here.

Lucas: Like Archbishop Aymond, I never dreamed about this, but today seemed a little bit like a dream ? on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, to be over the tomb of Peter and to be with the successor, the vicar of Christ, to be able to receive the pallium from him and to receive his blessing, to know that solidarity with him.

I've been living in two worlds lately. I haven't been installed yet in the Archdiocese of Omaha, so I'm packing up in Springfield getting ready to go there. I was praying very much during the Mass for the Diocese of Springfield, that they would receive a good shepherd without much delay, and for the people of the Archdiocese of Omaha, that I could be a shepherd with the mind and heart of Christ. So you have the kind of pastoral effect that I think the Holy Father has on all of us in the church ? he certainly has that on me. He's a very benevolent pastor. I experienced that today, and I'd like to be able to imitate that and to share that in my new archdiocese.

Vigeron: A Bible text that's been going through my head that summarizes my feelings is one that we didn't hear in the basilica today: ?I am the vine, you are the branches.? I had this profound sense of the living, organic reality of the church, that Peter isn't an idea, but rather he continues to live in the presence of the pope. There have been some 200 in between ? what's the number?

[Note: Dolan replied ?268,? while I said ?265,? which is the official Vatican number. Vigeron turned to Dolan and smiled: ?See, he knows more than you.? Dolan, who has a doctorate in church history from the Catholic University of America, looked at me and said: ?Are you not counting the Avignon popes?"]

Vigeron: When the Holy Father talked in his homily about the ?co-heirs,? I was thinking about the people who came with me, the people who mean so much to me, my brothers here, my sister and sisters-in-law, a couple of nephews ? I think my niece is still stuck in Atlanta, I'm not sure she ever got out. This is a real, organic, living thing, the church ? she's not an idea, she's not an invention. It's a personal kind

of reality that we get to be connected with in so many ways. Today was a powerful experience of what I hope is the way that we all think about belonging to the church, even in our local parishes. That's what I thanked God for, that I get to belong to the same family as Peter and Paul, and to do some of their same work. That's what's on my heart and mind.

Question: Can you say more about the significance of three of you having ties to St. Louis? What does that say about St. Louis?

Carlson: I think there's a very strong and lively presbyterate in St. Louis. I think it's a real honor to all of the priests in the archdiocese that two of their brothers and their new archbishop would all receive the pallium together. I know there was great excitement from the people who came from the Archdiocese of St. Louis. They all said they came for me, but secretly I think they're here for a much wider audience! They're very, very proud, and it's a great day of blessing for our archdiocese.

Dolan: I think Archbishop Lucas and I are glad you said that, because it would sound self-serving if we did. But we believe it. There's something about St. Louis – it's one of those archdioceses where there's still a Catholic culture, where the church is very cohesive and one is very proud to be a Catholic. One's identity is almost one's parish, one's school, being a Catholic in the archdiocese. It's very vibrant. We used to call it – well, we didn't call it that, the name was given to it – the Rome of the West, because so many dioceses came from it. That was very visible to me today, that it was a great honor for the Archdiocese of St. Louis.

Lucas: It's a great place to grow up. It's also a great place to be Catholic, and until you leave there, you don't realize that the whole world's not like that. It's a wonderful place for families, and it's a great place for vocations to be nurtured.

Dolan: New York ain't bad either –

Question: Can you say something about the use of the pallium ceremony as a pilgrimage for people from your archdioceses?

Dolan: One of our pilgrims said, "This is two of the things I like doing most – going to church and eating!?"

Vigneron: There's a great thing about Rome, which is that when Catholics come here they feel this is their city. I think the Romans are generally quite good about that. They have a sense that they have the city as a kind of trust, and that anybody who belongs to the church has a kind of citizenship in Rome. I think that's a beautiful experience.

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