

Four points to make about Gomez and L.A.

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 9, 2010 All Things Catholic

As difficult as it is to talk about any Catholic subject these days other than the pope and the sexual abuse crisis, I'm going to give it a whirl, because there was another important storyline this week: In effect, the Vatican paved the way on Tuesday for the first Hispanic cardinal in the United States, as well as something of a new tone in the country's largest archdiocese.

The move came with the April 6 appointment of Archbishop Jose Gomez of San Antonio as coadjutor of Los Angeles, meaning that Gomez will succeed Cardinal Roger Mahony after Mahony turns 75 next February. While diocesan bishops can serve after their 75th birthday if the pope keeps them on, Mahony has made it clear that after a quarter-century at the helm, he's ready to go.

The Gomez appointment is in some ways a Rorschach test for the prism through which one sees the Catholic church. If you're inclined to think globally, the fact that he's Latino probably looms largest; if you lean more to ideology, it's his Opus Dei connection that jumps off the page.

With 4.3 million Catholics, Los Angeles is the largest archdiocese in the United States, and among the largest in the world. Inevitably, the leader in L.A. sets a national and international tone, making the Gomez nomination significant well beyond the boundaries of the archdiocese.

I spoke to both Gomez and Mahony by phone on Tuesday afternoon, after their press conference in Los Angeles. Gomez will be formally welcomed to Los Angeles in a May 26 "Mass of Reception." In the meantime, four points about the appointment seem worth making.

Changing demographics

The Gomez nomination seems another indication that whatever else one wants to say about the Vatican, it is at least paying attention to the demographics of American Catholicism. The decision to make Daniel Di Nardo of Houston a cardinal in November 2007 reflected the population shift from the Northeast to the Southwest, and elevating Gomez, who will certainly become a cardinal himself shortly after taking over from Mahony, puts a face on the burgeoning Hispanic wing of the American church.

According to a recent Pew Forum study of religion in America, Hispanics will represent more than forty percent of American Catholics by 2030, a trend that Pew director Luis Lugo refers to as the "browning" of the church. Gomez was born in Monterrey, Mexico, and will become the first Latino cardinal in the United States, meaning that the country's hierarchy will better reflect its grassroots.

Jesuit Fr. Allan Figueroa Deck, executive director of the Secretariat for Cultural Diversity of the U.S. bishops' conference, called the appointment "a great moment in the history of the Catholic church in the United States, a sign of the leadership that Latinos are exercising and need to exercise."

Gomez said he keeps asking himself, "Why am I here?", and the answer he's arrived at is that his nomination is

primarily intended by the Vatican and the pope as a recognition of the importance of Latino/a Catholics in America.

The Opus Dei connection

Opus Dei has spent the better part of the last two decades trying to convince the world that they're really just normal folk, loyal to Catholic teaching and to the pope, but not a bunch of fanatics attempting to hijack the church. In the abstract, if you had to pick one bishop with ties to Opus Dei anywhere in the world who best makes that case, it might well be Jose Gomez.

People who know Gomez say that he's practical rather than ideological, with a real ability to listen.

"Any fears people had about him because of Opus Dei were quickly dispelled," said Fr. Virgilio Elizondo, perhaps America's best-known Hispanic Catholic theologian, who divides his time between San Antonio and Notre Dame.

"He's a very moderate person," Elizondo told me. "Ideological categories don't really fit him."

In some ways, there are intriguing parallels between Gomez's arrival in San Antonio in early 2005 and his appointment to Los Angeles. In San Antonio too, Gomez took over from a prelate widely seen as more liberal, Archbishop Patrick Flores, whose emphasis had been on social justice and especially immigrant rights. Despite fears that Gomez would undo that legacy, most observers say it didn't happen.

"He didn't come in and squash anything," said Fr. David Garcia of San Antonio, who serves as a senior advisor to Catholic Relief Services. In fact, Gomez became a staunch supporter of immigrant rights -- Garcia said he remembers marching with Gomez down the streets of San Antonio during his second year in a pro-immigrant rally.

"He encouraged what was already there, and gradually blended in some of his own priorities," Garcia said.

Chief among those priorities, observers such as Elizondo and Garcia say, was catechesis. Gomez likewise told me over the phone it's fair to say that education in the faith, especially for Hispanics, is a core concern.

Garcia said Gomez is also a good listener.

"I've been in priests' meetings where he would propose something, and it was pretty clear which way he wanted it to go," Garcia said. "But if a good majority wanted to take another look at it, he would. It wasn't always a foreordained conclusion."

Gomez told me on Tuesday that he doesn't want to start talking about his priorities in L.A., or cobbling together a plan of action, until he's spent time listening to people on the ground. Mahony said that his main charge to Gomez in the short time he'll spend as coadjutor is to move around the sprawling archdiocese, meeting its priests, deacons, religious and laity, and getting a sense of the challenges awaiting him.

One thing Gomez did tell me that points toward continuity is that he wants the annual Religious Education Congress to continue. The country's largest annual Catholic gathering, the congress routinely draws tens of thousands of people to the Anaheim Convention Center for liturgies, plenary sessions, scores of workshops in English, Spanish and Vietnamese, and a special youth event. It also, however, has drawn protests over the years from some conservatives who charge that Mahony gives a platform to dissenting Catholic voices.

(In the interests of full disclosure, for the last several years I've spoken at the Congress, though so far as I know I've not been among those who have drawn protests.)

One other footnote: Gomez says he is not a "member" of Opus Dei, but rather that he was ordained a priest in Opus Dei and that his spirituality reflects that background. If he's a "member" of anything now, he says, it's the diocese he leads.

'Benedict bishops'

As things stand today, there are seven archdioceses in America where the archbishop is almost certain to become a cardinal: New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and now Houston. By this stage, Benedict XVI has appointed new leaders in three of those spots: Archbishop Donald Wuerl in Washington; Archbishop Timothy Dolan in New York; and Gomez in Los Angeles.

Three cases does not necessarily a pattern make, but give the importance of those appointments, it's a safe bet they were carefully considered both by the papal nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, and in Rome. For that reason, a general observation seems in order.

Basically speaking, if Benedict faces a choice between a candidate whose outlook could be described as "center-right" and someone who is more "center-left," he goes with the center-right candidate. In New York, for example, widely touted candidates included Dolan and Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta; in Los Angeles, Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento was considered a leading contender along with Gomez. Both Gregory and Soto would conventionally be seen as more "center-left," Dolan and Gomez as leaning to the "center-right."

Yet Benedict and Sambi also seem to be looking for center-right candidates with reputations as pragmatic, open-minded bridge builders. That, too, would generally describe Wuerl, Dolan and Gomez. None of the three, for example, have been among the most aggressive voices in the bishops' conference calling for denial of communion to pro-choice Catholic politicians. Wuerl has been the target of protests from staunch pro-life groups for refusing to publicly excommunicate Nancy Pelosi, and Dolan came to the defense of Catholic Relief Services when it was briefly under fire for allegedly promoting condoms as part of its overseas anti-AIDS efforts.

In a sound-bite, the profile of a "Benedict bishop," at least in the most important dioceses in the United States, would seem to be a conservative pastor -- as opposed to a conservative ideologue.

Ratzinger vs. Benedict

As the five-year anniversary of Benedict's election approaches, it has long since become clear that one cannot draw a straight line between the personal convictions of Joseph Ratzinger and the policies of Benedict XVI. His senior American appointments confirm the point.

Back in 1999, Ratzinger joined two other veteran Vatican cardinals in denouncing careerism among the bishops -- Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, who once headed the Congregation for Bishops, and Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez, at the time prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. Among other things, Gantin, Medina and Ratzinger all suggested that a bishop should usually remain in the same diocese for life, in part because of the spousal imagery that a bishop is "married" to his diocese, to its people and its priests.

Ratzinger even expressed regret for having left the Archdiocese of Munich, where he was archbishop from May 1977 to February 1982, in a 1999 interview with *30 Giorni*.

If that were Benedict's philosophy as pope, none of his three most important appointments in the United States should have been made.

Wuerl is a Pittsburgh native and a priest of the diocese, and hence becoming the bishop of Pittsburgh should have been the end of the line. Dolan is a St. Louis native, so his appointment as an auxiliary of St. Louis in June 2001 likewise fit the "one diocese for life" theory. His transfer to Milwaukee a year later at least kept him generally in the Midwest. Gomez was born in Mexico, but spent much of his priestly career in Texas and has personal ties to San Antonio. By way of contrast, he jokingly told me on Tuesday that when a reporter asked him how much time he had spent in Los Angeles, his reply was, "You mean, how many hours?"

The reality, however, is that before a pope hands someone the keys to one of the country's most important dioceses, he needs an indication that the guy is up to the job. Normally, that means looking for someone with a solid track record in a mid-sized diocese someplace else, or at least someone without a reputation for running the place into the ground.

With each of these three appointments, there was criticism about bringing someone in from the outside: "You mean to say that the pope couldn't find a single priest in Washington, or New York, or Los Angeles worthy of the job?" Aside from the fact that an outsider is sometimes able to start fresh, because he doesn't carry any local baggage, the problem with hiring from within is that it can be a crap shoot in terms of administrative ability. Purely in terms of management dynamics, the smart move is often to tap a proven commodity.

All of which illustrates the point that leaders may have a lofty personal vision about how things ought to be done, but sometimes that vision has to yield to the practical demands of running a complex organization. Time and the tides stop for no one, even popes -- and to return to where we began, that's a lesson with implications for many issues in the church, including, perhaps, the sexual abuse crisis.

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Under the rubric of "Coming Attractions," there's an upcoming event in Washington, D.C., in May that ought to be of wide interest.

The title is "A Washington Briefing for the Nation's Catholic Community," to be held on Thursday and Friday, May 6 and 7, 2010, cosponsored by Trinity Washington University and the *National Catholic Reporter*. Sessions will be held on Trinity's campus, with hotel accommodations at the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill.

I'll be on hand, moderating a panel on Vatican diplomacy. Other confirmed participants include:

- Helen Alvare, former director of information and planning for the U.S. Bishops' pro-life office, and a professor of law at George Mason School of Law.
- Sr. Carol Keehan, D.C., president and chief executive officer of the Catholic Health Association of the United States.
- Thomas Patrick Melady, U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See under President George H.W. Bush and senior diplomat in residence at The Institute of World Politics.

- R. James Nicholson, U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See and Secretary for Veterans Affairs under George W. Bush, and senior counsel in Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck's Washington, D.C., office.
- Archbishop Edwin Frederick O'Brien of Baltimore, formerly Archbishop of the Archdiocese for the Military Services of the United States.
- Fr. Thomas J. Reese, S.J., senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown and the former editor of *America* magazine.
- James Roosevelt, Jr., president and chief executive officer of Tufts Health Plan, a not-for-profit health maintenance organization (HMO).
- Dr. Robert Royal, president of the Faith & Reason Institute.
- Patricia A. Weitzel-O'Neill, Superintendent of Schools for the Archdiocese of Washington, recently appointed executive director of the Center for Catholic Education at Boston College's Lynch School of Education.
- John Zogby, the nation's leading political pollster and senior fellow at the Catholic University of America's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies.
- Joe Feuerherd, *NCR* publisher and editor-in-chief.
- Patricia McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University.

Further information and registration forms are available on the conference Web site:

http://ncrnews.org/conference/briefing_may2010/

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