

Three archbishops and the American Catholic future

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 29, 2010 NCR Today



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In the abstract, one might not think of Archbishops Thomas Wenski of Miami, Dennis Schnurr of Cincinnati, and Jerome Listecki of Milwaukee as a natural threesome. Yet fate thrust these prelates together today, as the three Americans among 38 newly appointed archbishops from around the Catholic world who are in Rome to receive the pallium.

The pallium is a narrow band of woolen cloth which serves as a symbol of the archbishop's office, and is bestowed by the pope each year on June 29, the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. I'm in Rome this week, so I attended the pallium ceremony this morning and then headed up to the North American College for the traditional reception honoring the new archbishops.

Given that these three prelates were in the spotlight today, it's worth pondering what implications for the American Catholic future are posed by the ascent of a Harley-riding champion of the downtrodden (Wenski), a consummate church insider (Schnurr), and a straight shooting, by-the-book pastor (Listecki).

At one level, there are striking similarities among the three men. All are virtually the same age (Schnurr is 62, Listecki 61, and Wenski 59). Two of the three, Schnurr and Listecki, have roots in the Midwest, and all three are the offspring of Catholic immigrants from central Europe. (Wenski and Listecki are Polish, Schnurr German.)

All three archbishops are solidly pro-life, and all three say they support the "zero tolerance" approach of the American church on sexual abuse. Each man, however, has faced criticism for his handling of the crisis from victims' groups. Listecki in particular has faced questions since a review by the national bishops' conference found that his former diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin, backed accused priests in 64 percent of cases, as opposed to a national average of ten percent.

Yet there are also important contrasts among the three men, which collectively suggest that Benedict XVI is not seeking a rigid uniformity at the senior leadership level of the American church.

Wenski, who previously served as the bishop of Orlando, would likely make most top ten lists among American bishops for "most hip." He listens to hot Cuban and Haitian music, and likes to hit the road on his motorcycle. (Asked if he had any regrets about leaving Orlando, Wenski said he'd miss the back-roads which allow him to open up the throttle. Traffic around Miami, he said, is more congested.)

Wenski is probably best known in Catholic circles for his social justice efforts, particularly his advocacy on behalf of immigrants and immigration reform. The first native of south Florida ever to serve as the Archbishop of Miami, Wenski was a young priest when he helped found a parish for Haitian immigrants in Miami. He learned Creole in the assignment, and over the years added Spanish and two African tribal languages (Ibo and Kirundi) to his repertoire.

Wenski has a master's degree in sociology from Fordham, and prior to being named an auxiliary bishop of Miami in 1997 he served as the archdiocesan director of Catholic Charities. In a typical Wenski flourish, he spent the weekend before his appointment to Miami was announced joining a protest march organized by a coalition of farm workers pressing growers and supermarket chains for higher wages for tomato pickers.

During an early round of interviews with Miami media, Wenski said that immigration will continue to be a key concern in his new post.

"The present system, the lack of action, is resulting in the creation of a new underclass of people that are exploitable because they have no legal status, that are afraid of a knock on the door in the middle of the night," he said. "If they're the victims of crimes, they're reluctant to call the police because they might pay for it with deportation."

Wenski referred to Miami as "our nation's new Ellis Island," a leading port of entry for immigrants and refugees.

"These immigrants are not the problem," Wenski said. "The problem is the antiquated and inadequate law that needs to be changed."



Schnurr took a different path to the pallium, growing up in rural Iowa

as one of only four Catholic boys in his hometown (two of the rest were his brothers, and the fourth was a cousin), entering the priesthood after briefly flirting with a career as a grocer, and moving swiftly into a series of prominent ecclesiastical jobs.

Known as pragmatic, hard-working, and skilled at nuts-and-bolts administration, Schnurr worked in the Vatican embassy in Washington in the mid-1980s, and was then tapped as Associate General Secretary of the U.S. bishops' conference in 1989. When John Paul II came to Denver for World Youth Day in 1993, Schnurr was put in charge of organizing the event. The bishops obviously approved of his performance, because he was made General Secretary of the conference in 1994.

tSchnurr was named bishop of Duluth, Minnesota, in 2001, and became the coadjutor archbishop of Cincinnati under Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk in October 2008. He took over last December, when Pilarczyk's resignation was accepted by Benedict XVI.

In contrast to Pilarczyk's reputation as a leader of the church's more progressive wing, most observers see Schnurr as essentially non-ideological. Among other things, he's expressed reservations about clergy and religious getting involved in politics. (In 2006, he withdrew an invitation for Sr. Helen Prejean to speak at an education dinner in Duluth because the famed "Dead Man Walking" activist had signed an advertisement calling for the impeachment of then-President George Bush. Schnurr said he admired Prejean's work, but was concerned about the church seeming "partisan.")

tAs bishop, Schnurr's priorities have been characteristically practical: promoting vocations to the priesthood, strengthening marriage, and improving religious education. In Duluth he had some success with vocations, naming himself the vocations director and increasing the number of seminarians from eight to 24. In Cincinnati he's strongly backed an ambitious fundraising effort for the local seminary which, among other things, will expand the number of apartments for seminarians from 46 to 72.

tSchnurr has also pledged transparency with regard to finances in Cincinnati, saying "the more information we give people on how the money is being managed, the more confidence they have."

tFor his part, ListECKI grew up on the south side of Chicago, the son of a laborer at U.S. Steel, and describes his vocation to the Catholic priesthood as "womb to tomb," meaning that he never wanted to be anything else.

Remarkably, ListECKI is actually the first Polish-American archbishop of Milwaukee, despite the strong Polish element in Milwaukee's population.

On the basis of his résumé, one could safely say that ListECKI is very much at home in rules-bound, hierarchical structures: Aside from being a Catholic bishop, he's also a civil lawyer as well as a retired lieutenant colonel in the United States Army, where he served for almost two decades as a chaplain.

tSo far in his episcopal career, ListECKI has succeeded two men whose larger-than-life profiles, according to most observers, he didn't quite fill: Raymond Burke, a cultural warrior and staunch conservative, who preceded ListECKI in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and Timothy Dolan, a back-slapping, charismatic media darling in Milwaukee.

By consensus, ListECKI is neither an ideologue in the tradition of Burke, nor a rock star like Dolan.

tCertainly ListECKI yields pride of place to no one in terms of defending Catholic orthodoxy. He publicly chastised House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for suggesting that Catholic teaching on the beginning of life was up for grabs, and he expressed concern when Marquette University was on the brink of hiring an openly lesbian dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, who has openly challenged official Catholic teaching on marriage and sexuality.

ListECKI opposed the recent health care reform bill on the grounds that it opened the door to public funding of abortion, and advised parents not to take their children to the film "The Golden Compass" on the grounds that it "expresses hatred of Christianity and that portrays God, the church and religion as evil and oppressive, and urges children to join fallen angels in a rebellion against God."

tAt the same time, ListECKI has described denying communion to pro-choice Catholic politicians as a "last resort," and acknowledged that his criticism of the decision by Notre Dame to award an honorary doctorate to

President Barack Obama was mostly a gesture of support for the then-Bishop of South Bend, John D'Arcy.

Repeatedly, people with personal experience of ListECKI describe him as "down to earth," "personable" and "approachable."

"He doesn't seem like a terribly polarizing guy, which is a good thing," said Emily Naczek, a Catholic school teacher in Milwaukee.

To be sure, if ListECKI isn't Burke, he also isn't Wenski in terms of his personal investment in social justice issues.

"He's very strong in terms of Catholic identity, basic issues of pro life, gay marriage, stem cell research," said Ray Stroik, a retired professor and college administrator who worked on the La Crosse diocese's justice and peace commission.

"Yet he's not doing much on social justice, or global peace," Stroik said.

On the other hand, ListECKI insists that he supports a "consistent ethic of life," and has vigorously opposed the death penalty. Growing up in Chicago, ListECKI said, taught him to appreciate the value of diversity.

In the main, ListECKI said, there's not much point in speculation about what his ultimate objectives may be.

"What you see is what you get," ListECKI said in a recent interview. "I don't have hidden agenda. I am pretty straightforward and honest."

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In his homily this morning, Benedict XVI told the archbishops that their connection with the papacy is a "pledge of liberty," insulating them from the pressure of "local powers, national or international," and assuring their "full adherence to the truth and to the authentic tradition" of the church.

Benedict also returned to a theme made familiar by the sexual abuse crisis: The greatest threat to the church, the pope said, comes not from exterior challenges but from whatever "pollutes the faith and Christian life" — damaging the integrity of the mystical body, weakening its capacity for prophecy and witness, and tarnishing the beauty of its face.

The pope said that some Catholic communities around the world are threatened by persecution or political interference, but in other places, he said, the challenges are more subtle, taking the form of "misleading doctrine" or "ideological tendencies and practices contrary to the gospel."

The pope also said that divisions within the Christian family are "symptoms of the power of sin," and said that Christian unity is "always to be sought and renewed, from generation to generation." In that context, he welcomed the presence of an ecumenical delegation from the Patriarch of Constantinople, traditionally considered "first among equals" in the galaxy of Orthodox prelates.

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