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Interview with Archbishop Jerome ListECKI

by John L. Allen Jr.

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By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

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Ask any random sample of five people who know Archbishop Jerome ListECKI of Milwaukee to describe him, and the odds are good that the phrase "down to earth" will come up more than once. Affable and approachable, ListECKI may be one of the few prelates who could have followed the legendarily gregarious Archbishop Timothy Dolan in Milwaukee and not seem, at least a little bit, like a stuffed shirt in comparison.

That affability doesn't mean ListECKI shirks from taking strong stands — a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Reserves, ListECKI has publicly chastised House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for her interpretation of church teaching on abortion, criticized Notre Dame for awarding an honorary doctorate to President Barack Obama, and once even warned parents not to take their kids to see "The Golden Compass" because, he said, the movie "tries to lead them away from God."

Yet whether people agree with ListECKI on content or not, most give him high marks for style, especially his "regular guy" demeanor. Whatever else one might say, ListECKI clearly doesn't have a Renaissance prince model of the bishops' office.

tListecki, 61, is a Chicago native and a former auxiliary bishop under Cardinal Francis George. He succeeded now-Archbishop Raymond Burke in La Crosse, Wisconsin, in 2004, and was named to Milwaukee in January. I spoke with him briefly this afternoon at the North American College following the ceremony in which Pope Benedict XVI gave him the pallium, a narrow band of woolen cloth that symbolizes the archbishop's office.

What does it mean to you to receive the pallium today?

To kneel before the central figure in the Catholic church, the vicar of Christ on earth, is a humbling experience. If there's one word for it, I felt the humility, literally – the sense of being before that person who represents Christ for all us. Then, I also felt a tremendous sense of strength for the unity that represents. The church is a singular voice in the world through the pope, and this brought home what that means. It makes me think about how I, as an archbishop, am responsible to try to reflect that voice in my community. All those thoughts were flooding through my mind when I was there before him, which made it hard just to get words out to him – even simple things, you're tongue-tied and dumbfounded.

What did you say to him?

He asked me where I'm from, and I said "Milwaukee." He said he'd pray for strength for me to lead the people of Milwaukee. You only have about five or ten seconds, so then I kissed his ring as a sign of my obedience to him and to the church, the church's teaching.

I don't feel bad about being tongue-tied. I know people who actually make their living speaking in front of microphones who met John Paul, and when John Paul came up to them they couldn't get anything out. Usually he'd look at them with kindness, take their hands, say a few words and then move on – they'd still be trying to get something out.

Benedict XVI has been under considerable fire in recent months. In your mind, is there particular value to showing your unity with him right now?

Yes, I believe that's true. In his homily, the Holy Father talked about bearing the yoke, the responsibility of office, and that's real. Any position of leadership carries with it a tremendous burden. It rests on the shoulders of the leader, they assume that responsibility. I think when the pope could look out today and see 38 archbishops who are willing to stand with him, it helps – it helps to spread that responsibility out. Although the yoke is still present, it's like the gospel says, the yoke becomes lighter because it's shared.

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Yesterday's decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to allow a sex abuse lawsuit against the Vatican in Oregon to proceed is on the front pages of all the Italian papers today. Have you picked up interest or concern in any of your conversations here?

I haven't, and it would probably be improper for me to make much of a response without having seen it myself. In general, though, to try to make a connection to the Holy See when the responsibility lies with us as bishops strikes me as tenuous at best.

You have a hard act to follow in Milwaukee in the form of Archbishop Timothy Dolan. How has it been stepping into those shoes?

It's been fine. You know, the key is to be who you are ? I'm not Tim Dolan, but Tim Dolan's not Jerry ListECKI. You bring whatever strengths you have. I have a spirituality that makes me a firm believer that you are where God puts you. If God has me there at this time for some particular reason, I have to be open and try to be an instrument of his presence in whatever way he decides to use me.

From the outside, it could seem that Milwaukee has lived through some turbulence in recent years ? the swing from Rembert Weakland to Dolan, the sex abuse crisis, and so on. What's your impression of how the archdiocese is coping?

There are a lot of wonderful things in Milwaukee, beginning with the deep level of faith that people have. From the outside, the only things you hear about a city in relation to the church is what you read in the newspapers, and you don't get a sense of the tremendous love for the church by the people and the priests who are present there. That's one of the things that swept me in immediately about the Milwaukee community, their devotion to the church.

My experience of Milwaukee is that there are a lot of people who are very dedicated to the church and who love the church. I come in after Dolan, and they were just swept away by his personality, his humor, and his outreach. I see that everywhere. At one of the welcoming sessions I went to, I met a lady who told me that I was the first archbishop of Milwaukee she'd ever met. I asked her if she'd ever met Dolan, and she said no. I told her that she must be the only one of the 680,000 Catholics in Milwaukee who didn't, because everyone comes up to me and tells me they're friends with him. That connection was wonderful, and I think he left the archdiocese in great shape.

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