

Interview with Archbishop Dennis Schnurr

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

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

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Like members of any profession, bishops come with different skill sets: Some may be bricks-and-mortar men, some have a flair for public relations, some are formidable behind-the-scenes powerbrokers, and some are just simple pastoral figures.

Then there's Archbishop Dennis Schnurr of Cincinnati, who for most of his ecclesiastical career has been the guy who makes the church's trains run on time.

Schnurr says his favorite subjects in school were math and physics (in addition, of course, to religion), and it shows. His reputation for no-nonsense, nuts-and-bolts managerial skill have landed him at one point or another in almost every administrative position of consequence in the American Catholic church: After various gigs in his home diocese of Sioux City, Iowa, Schnurr was called to work at the nunciature, or papal embassy, in Washington, D.C., in 1985. Four years later he joined the staff of the bishops' conference, eventually serving as general secretary from 1995 to 2001.

In the midst of all that, the U.S. bishops tapped Schnurr to organize the 1993 World Youth Day in Denver, Colorado.

In terms of church politics, Schnurr is usually seen as a non-ideological centrist, and very much a champion of the bishops' conference. His stated priorities as a bishop include boosting vocations to the priesthood, improving religious education, and strengthening marriage — just the sort of practical, basically apolitical priorities one might expect from one of the premier managers in the American hierarchy.

Schnurr, 62, was named to Cincinnati as coadjutor archbishop in December 2008, and he took over from Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk one year later.

I spoke with Schnurr this afternoon at the North American College, the American seminary in Rome, following a reception in honor of him and Archbishops Jerome ListECKI of Milwaukee and Thomas Wenski of Miami — all of whom received the pallium, a narrow band of woolen cloth symbolizing the archbishop's office, from Pope Benedict XVI this morning.

What did it mean for you to receive the pallium today?

I think the Holy Father summed it up very nicely in his homily. There's the role of the bishop in his diocese, but no matter how effective the bishop may be in his diocese, he can't lose sight of the fact that it's part of the universal church. Being part of the universal church is not just part of the truth of the church, it's the way our living out of the gospel is accomplished. It can't be accomplished in any other way.

The Holy Father spoke about how Christ comes to free, to liberate, but that liberation can only take place in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati in union with Rome. The pallium represents that very fact, that we share in the responsibilities and the mission that Christ left to his apostles. All of that comes to mind.

Also, greeting the people who have come with me from Cincinnati, I've been very gratified that they do have a real sense of the universal church. I said to a number of them, now let's go back to the archdiocese and help others to understand that, because it is the way, as the Holy Father, that we are going to accomplish all that Christ wants to be accomplished for his church. It's what will liberate us from all the things we see weighing down the world in general.

When you went up, it seemed that the pope chatted with you for a few moments. What did he say?

It goes back to an exchange that happened when the pope visited the United States in 2008. You may remember that in his meeting with the bishops, Archbishop [Daniel] Pilarczyk addressed a question to him, and the Holy Father said to Pilarczyk, "Ah, yes, we've had many interesting discussions." So this morning, the Holy Father asked me, "Da dove viene?" ("Where do you come from?") I told him Cincinnati. He said, "Cincinnati, Cincinnati," and I told him that Archbishop Pilarczyk sends his greetings. He said, "Oh, yes, how is he?" I said that he's fine, and the Holy Father asked me to give him his greetings.

The pope talked about Rome as a "pledge of liberty." That's probably a tough sell for the American Catholic street, since people are more accustomed to thinking of Rome in terms of restrictions. The Vatican tells us what we can and can't do, it polices theologians, it issues edicts, and so on. Can you really persuade people that Rome is about freedom, not control?

In my opinion, one of the mistakes we often make in talking about teachings or about Rome is that we tend to talk about the "teachings of the church." It seems to me that when we use that terminology, it invites the rebuttal that these are just a bunch of old men who really are not in contact with reality. Wouldn't it be better off to talk about the "teachings of Christ?" That's what they are, because the church teaches as Christ teaches. They're one and the same. It's a little more difficult to dismiss the phrase, "the teachings of Christ" - much more difficult, it seems to me, than when we say, "This is what the church teaches."

It's the same thing, I think, in trying to say, "Rome sets you free." Yes, it does, but really aren't we trying to say, and wouldn't it be clearer to say, "Christ sets you free," and that he's entrusted the keys of the kingdom to Peter and his successors? It's through the successor of Peter that the wholeness of the church is preserved. Everything Christ has given to the church, its teachings, its structures, all of it, is as it is because it's a freeing experience. Of course, it can be a painful experience as well - it's freeing in that when a difficult situation arises, we don't have to come up with a creative solution on our own. The solution is given in the teachings of Christ, and going back to that is a freeing experience.

It's also freeing to know that whatever happens in the church, Christ has promised he'll be with it until the end of time, and he's true to his promises. I remember when I first started working with vocations in Duluth, one of the things I heard quite frequently was that the numbers are just going to get less and less, and we're just on this slide downhill. I said, "I don't think so." Christ has said that he will be with his church until the end of time. That means the seeds of vocations are still being planted. Christ is doing his part, the question is whether we're doing ours. That's another way that going back to the teachings of Christ is a freeing experience.

I can also fall back on my time as general secretary of the bishops' conference. It was always interesting going down to Capitol Hill. You would talk to congressmen and congresswomen, even non-Catholics, and they would say they really appreciate hearing from the Catholic church because it's always so consistent, it all comes together. They said we have the "complete package." Of course, they'd also say that while they really admire

and appreciate that about the church, it doesn't mean they can vote that way.

In a sound-bite, you're saying talk more about Christ and less about the rules and regulations?

Right. Of course, the rules and regulations aren't arbitrary. We also have to make a better distinction, maybe, between the teachings and the rules and regulations that flow from them. Those rules can be modified, provided that they're not based on divine revelation. Here again we have to distinguish between rules based on revelation and rules based on merely ecclesiological practice and so on.

Given your experience with the bishops' conference, I imagine that the horizontal dimension of the pallium is also meaningful to you ? standing together with other archbishops from the States and around the world.

Keep in mind that I worked in the bishops' conference for twelve years, six years as general secretary. I could see, and I think I still see, that when the bishops of the United States work together, really good things can be accomplished. On the other hand, when there seem to be some tensions among the bishops, questioning one another's sincerity (though always in very general terms), bad things happen. The media will sometimes talk about how so-and-so is a "good bishop," a bishop you can trust. Well, what's the message? That there are good bishops and bad bishops, ones you can trust and ones you can't. Those divisions don't get us anywhere.

When I worked at the nunciature, I remember Archbishop Laghi would always respond to such questions by saying, "Remember, they are all appointed by the Holy Father, and our church teaches that they are appointed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We must see the actions of the Holy Spirit in this?" however difficult that may be, and allowing for the fact, of course, that we bishops can fail to respond to the gift of the Holy Spirit. But above all things, put on charity!

The pallium ceremony symbolizes that charitable bond not just with the pope, but also among you bishops?

Yes. I know Archbishop ListECKI and Archbishop WENSKI very well, and I know their talents, which aren't mine. I'm encouraged to know that men with those talents, of that caliber, and with that love of the church, have been given more responsibility in the church in the United States. The whole church in the United States benefits from those talents.

Do you feel that being with the pope now has added significance because of everything that's happened lately? It's obviously been a tough year so far for the church in Europe, for the Vatican, and for the pope.

I haven't given a lot of thought to that, but I do think there are some parallels to when the Holy Father was elected pope. There were these stories out there ? the Rottweiler and all that. These are people who did not know Cardinal Ratzinger. I had the privilege of meeting with Cardinal Ratzinger on a regular basis, because I accompanied the officers of the bishops' conference. He was a man who always listened very closely and had great pastoral instincts. I can remember discussions where we had sent our concerns in advance, and the answers had come back in writing. If the officers thought the responses were not correct, they would go in to meet with Cardinal Ratzinger. There were a number of occasions where Ratzinger said, "Ah, that was not clear in the correspondence. We will have to rethink this." That's the Cardinal Ratzinger I came to know.

It's the same thing now. As you say, these have not been easy months for the church, and I'm sure they haven't been easy for the Holy Father. To be honest, some of the reporting has struck me as, "Don't let the facts get in the way." People seem to expect him to have assumed responsibility in areas before those areas were even entrusted to him.

In that context, does being with the pope now carry extra significance for you?

Yes, sure. I hope that during this time, we all have our opportunity to express our appreciation and our affection for the Holy Father. Probably every bishop knows what it's like to be beat up on occasion, though not on this scale. I hope that our words of affection for the Holy Father help him to understand that we are grateful to have him, and the church is blessed to have him. The Holy Spirit was truly with us when Cardinal Ratzinger was elected as the pope.

You have a track record of success in generating vocations to the priesthood. What's the secret?

It's the same thing that has to take place, in my opinion, with youth and young adult ministry. We have a tendency in the church to say to young people, "You are the church of the future." The young people don't like hearing that. What they want to hear is that they have a lot to offer the church, now and in the future, and what we tend to forget is the "now." The secret in vocations work is to get that message out there, to say to young people that I recognize your talents, the church recognizes your talents, and we need them "now!"

Another thing is that I think the bishop has to be very visible in vocations work. How can a bishop say that vocations work is very important, the cultivation of vocations to the priesthood is very important, but then turn around and say, "I'm too busy for that." It can't happen. The bishop has to be available to young people to talk about vocations. The role of the priest is critically important, no doubt about it, and statistics will show that. But I think that if the bishop makes it a part of his ministry, insisting that even though he's got other things to do, this is a priority, that also gets the priests to think more about it. More priests will start to do the inviting.

I have "Andrew dinners" in Cincinnati, as I did in Duluth. Already I can see that more and more priests are talking to me about young men in their parishes. If the bishop makes it a part of his work, the priests begin to examine themselves, to ask themselves, how much they have made it a part of their ministry as well.

The final part is prayer. It's what the Holy Father said when he visited the United States in 2008. One of the questions posed to him was what to do about declining numbers of priests, and he said, don't overlook the obvious. Christ said to beg the harvest-master "in other words, prayer. In Duluth I developed a prayer for vocations and I asked all the parishes to recite it at every weekend Mass for sure, and if possible at every Mass throughout the week. The parishes responded in a very generous way. That's what Christ told us to do, so that's how I bring it together in terms of vocations work.

We're seeing some returns already in Cincinnati. When I arrived, we had 26 or 27 seminarians. This fall we'll have somewhere between 37 and 40.

You said a moment ago that Archbishops Listeki and Wenski have talents you don't. How would you describe your talents?

I have the reputation of being an administrator. When it comes to getting things done, I'm no-nonsense, but on the other hand, I'm fair. That's an impression of myself that's developed over the years, because that's what people have told me "they only told me after I moved on, of course, but that's been the pattern. After my years at the bishops' conference, I heard from bishops who felt that I treated them all equally. It was the same with the staff "they told me that they didn't always like my decisions, but I was fair in making them.

As a bishop, and even more as an archbishop, you can't just do behind-the-scenes administration. You also have to be a public figure. Has that been a stretch for you?

If I were to describe myself, I don't consider myself an extrovert by any stretch of the imagination. But I've

been asked to assume responsibility in the church in different situations, and it's one of those things where I've just adjusted to it. In the archdiocese, people have made it very easy, because they're so warm and welcoming. It's easy to relax with them. At least with me, I find that when I can relax with people, I find it easy to talk with them as well.

You've brought around 150 people with you to the pallium ceremony. Have you given any thought to how their experience could change something back home?

Yes. I already mentioned one, which is that some of the people here were talking about how the pallium Mass was such a wonderful experience of the universal church, and I said to them, let's bring that back. You can do that just by talking about your experience in Rome. Maybe we can also be a little more attuned to those occasions when we hear things like, "Rome is now telling us to do this," and so on. I don't think I'm alone in thinking that in the United States, we've allowed what we associate with democracy to filter into the church. Well, you don't vote on truths, right?

The other thing that seems to me will be helpful is that it just gives me an opportunity to get to know the people of the archdiocese better, and gives them a chance to get to know me. In my experience, working in different situations, once we understand one another better, we don't jump to conclusions about what the other person's agenda is and so on.

You organized the World Youth Day in Denver in 1983. Many observers believe that event helped improve Roman attitudes about the United States and the American church. Do you agree?

I think it was helpful, but I don't think it was that alone. A number of things happened in the 1990s that transformed the attitude of Rome toward the church in the United States. Based on my experience in Washington, both at the nunciature and at the bishops' conference, there was an attitude in Rome, among some individuals though not all, that just as the United States government uses size and wealth to wield influence, that we as a Catholic church in the United States were trying to do the same thing. Remember that World Youth Day in Denver was entrusted by John Paul II to the bishops' conference, and when we asked him why, he said two things: One, and these aren't exactly his words, but he said it's become bigger than even what I had expected. Two, I want it to be better known. The Americans have a reputation for organizing, and we need to be better organized. You're also the media capital of the world, and we want to better publicize the World Youth Day. There was some ambivalence from the get-go, and some bishops weren't sure an event like this would be successful in the United States. It wasn't that they didn't want it, but we don't have a tradition of pilgrimage in this country.

Certainly not to Denver ?

That was the Holy Father and mountains!

The old rap in Rome about the United States is that it's a historically Protestant culture that's unsuited as a carrier for Catholicism, and fundamentally you can't trust it. I know people in the Vatican who date a change in that attitude to the Denver World Youth Day.

I think it played a role. Look at some of the things that have happened - the very fact that Archbishop [Augustine] DiNoia came to Rome, worked for Cardinal Ratzinger, and is now the Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship. Before all that, he had been the director of the secretariat for doctrine at the bishops' conference. While he was there, the Holy See would ask the bishops in the United States to study a question and then to send the results. It was a real compliment to the bishops' conference, the way that the Holy See wanted to collaborate with us. I think the same thing could be said about the work that's been done on the Roman Missal. Do we agree with everything they did? No, but on the other hand, if you look at some of the key

players on the Roman Missal, Americans played some very prominent roles.

I think there was a change, and World Youth Day contributed to it, but it was bigger than that. There was a whole change in attitude at the bishops' conference and in Rome. What all contributed to that, I don't know, but comparing when I arrived at the conference in 1989 and when I left the conference in 2001, it was a completely different relationship.

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