

Triumph of theologians over diplomats in Vatican

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 30, 2010 NCR Today



Rome

In what's already a turbulent time, Pope Benedict XVI has triggered another Vatican earthquake, changing the guard in three senior leadership positions. Among those exiting the scene is the Catholic church's most prominent ecumenical leader over the past decade, while the new arrivals complete the ascent of personal friends and theological protégés of the pontiff to the Vatican's top positions.

The Vatican announced today two key personnel moves:

- Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Quebec replaces Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re as Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, responsible for recommending new bishops to the pope all over the world;
- Archbishop Rino Fisichella becomes the first President of the new Pontifical Commission for Promotion of the New Evangelization, a new Vatican department devoted to reawakening the faith in the West, especially Europe.

Tomorrow, announcement of a third transition is expected: Bishop Kurt Koch of Basel, Switzerland, will replace Cardinal Walter Kasper as President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews.

Kasper has been the face of the Vatican's ecumenical outreach since 2001. He recently held a farewell session with reporters in Rome, describing the effort to restore Christian unity as the "construction site of the church of the future."

Ouellet, Koch and Fisichella all have longstanding ties to Benedict XVI.

Fisichella, a veteran of the Roman scene, collaborated with Ratzinger in the preparation of John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, while Ouellet and Koch both move in the theological circles associated with the journal *Communio*, which was co-founded by Joseph Ratzinger. (Read more about Fisichella and the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization here: [Pope launches council to fight secular 'Eclipse of God'](#) [1].)

All three over the years have argued for what Benedict XVI describes as a "hermeneutic of continuity?"

regarding the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), stressing that Vatican II did not repeal earlier teachings and traditions.

In July 2009, Koch addressed that point in a letter to the priests of Basel:

“Instead of accusing others, and even the pope, of wishing to go back to before the council, everyone would be well advised to look over their own books and reassess their own personal position on the council,” he wrote. “Not everything that was said and done after the council, was therefore done in accordance with the council.”

One striking twist to today’s news is that as of now, neither the Secretariat of State nor the Congregation for Bishops is led by a product of the Vatican’s diplomatic service. Traditionally, both posts have been held by men who come out of the diplomatic corps – preserving a balance, observers have usually argued, between the church’s spiritual and doctrinal priorities and its social, political and humanitarian interests.

In sound-bite fashion, one might say that today’s appointments complete the triumph of theologians over diplomats under Benedict XVI.

The pope did make one diplomatic move of note today, naming Archbishop Celestine Migliore, currently the Vatican’s representative to the United Nations, as his new nuncio, or ambassador, in Poland.

In terms of timing, it’s traditional for the Vatican to make a flurry of moves in late June ahead of the pope’s annual summer retreat at Castel Gandolfo. This year, Benedict XVI will leave for his summer residence next Wednesday after the conclusion of his General Audience.

In brief comments to reporters this morning, the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, said that the legal document formally creating the new Council for Promotion of the New Evangelization is not expected to appear soon because work on the document is ongoing.

Lombardi also confirmed that the pope met this morning with Archbishop André-Joseph Léonard of Brussels. While he did not offer any details, the meeting follows a series of June 24 police raids in Belgium on church properties as part of a sex abuse probe and comes amid an escalating diplomatic row between Rome and Belgium over the incident.

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