

Interview with Archbishop Thomas Wenski

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

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Rome

If a Hollywood studio were casting a remake of *On the Waterfront*, it could do a lot worse than feeling out Archbishop Thomas Wenski about playing the Karl Malden role. He's got both the look and the soul of a classic "labor priest" — tough but affable, plain-spoken and a man of the people (tooling around south Florida on his Harley motorcycle), and intensely concerned with the fate of the poor and downtrodden.

Of course, the fact that Benedict XVI named Wenski the new Archbishop of Miami on April 20 probably means that the ship has already sailed on his acting career.

Wenski is in Rome this week to receive the pallium, the narrow band of woolen cloth that symbolizes the archbishop's office, from Pope Benedict XVI. It's one measure of his popularity that although Wenski was the last of the three new American archbishops to be named during the past year, his delegation in Rome is the largest. Some 250 people, evenly divided between his old diocese of Orlando and his new gig in Miami, made the trip.

On the national stage, Wenski has long been a leader in social justice matters, especially immigration. That's partly personal, as Wenski is the son of Polish immigrants to America. He's also one of the few American bishops fluent in Haitian Creole, as a result of his work with Haitian immigrants while a young priest in Miami.

Wenski sat down for an interview this afternoon, which touched a broad range of subjects — from the sexual abuse crisis to immigration reform, from the Vatican's role in Haiti to Miami as a symbol of the coming American Catholic church.

The following is a transcript of our conversation.

What does receiving the pallium mean to you?

It's a very humbling experience, because he has this confidence in me in naming me to the see of Miami despite my obvious shortcomings. I hope that I will live up to the trust that he has placed in me.

Do you have any personal connection to the pope?

I couldn't say that I know him, but I met him on an auxiliary visit to Rome when I was an auxiliary bishop in Miami and he was Cardinal Ratzinger in the Holy Office. One of his priest secretaries at that time was Zygmunt Zimowski, who's now at the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, is somebody I've been able to get to know. He's been to my home in Orlando once or twice, on holiday. So I sort of know the pope once removed?

How many ad limina meetings did you have with Cardinal Ratzinger?

I've been on two ad liminas, once as auxiliary in Miami and once as coadjutor bishop of Orlando.

I ask because many bishops say their best meeting during the ad limina visits was usually with Cardinal Ratzinger. Was that your experience?

Oh, yes. He was very much at ease with everybody else. It was certainly a different tenor than some of the other dicasteries that we visited. He listened and he was also very friendly. He gave the impression that he understood what the bishops were up against, he understood their challenges. I was certainly very impressed by those visits.

I remember that when I was on one of the ad liminas, one of the priests who came with us said that he was waiting to catch a bus to go to one of the beach areas outside of Rome, in his shorts, and Ratzinger came up walking by. He was very friendly, and when the priest apologized for being in his shorts, Ratzinger said, "Well, fine." He was a very human person.

This obviously hasn't been an easy period for the pope. Does it have any special significance for you to be with him at a moment when he's under fire?

The Holy Father, whether it's this one or any other, is always under fire from somebody. I'm very edified by his support of me, and I'm grateful to give any support I can to him.

As an American bishop, do you feel like this pope has given you the support you need to deal with the sexual abuse crisis?

Oh, yes. We saw that when he was still at the Holy Office. I think he's been very supportive. As we look at where we've been and where we are now, the church in the United States can be pretty sure that the crisis has been surmounted, in our area of the world anyway. What the John Jay study is showing us, and our reviews and all the audits that we're doing, confirm that the incidences of abuse have dropped significantly. This was something that happened, obviously tragic, in a particular period of time, and it's been surmounted. Right now, most of the ink in the press is about cases that are thirty or forty years old, or more, but the past is not the future.

Coincidentally, the day you received the pallium was the day news broke in Rome that the United States Supreme Court had allowed a lawsuit against the Vatican to proceed in Oregon, on the theory that priests are "employees" of the Vatican. What do you make of that claim?

It's certainly one that doesn't have any basis in reality. To be honest, it's sometimes hard for bishops to think that priests are employees of us! In fact, in some areas and at some times they've been considered independent contractors, even for income tax purposes. The church is much more decentralized than most people really understand. Unfortunately, some of these lawyers do not have a good sense of ecclesiology.

I suppose they don't teach that in law school ?

Lot of things they don't teach in law school! That's one of them, and this claim is certainly preposterous, because the pope is not the CEO of Roman Catholicism Inc.

There's another lawsuit in Kentucky, the O'Bryan case, which focuses not on priests but on bishops, asserting that bishops are Vatican agents or employees. Do you consider yourself a Vatican employee?

No, because they're not the ones paying my pension. If that were the case, they could make that argument, but it's not. Our ecclesiology, our theology, of communion with the Holy Father, does not support that type of logic.

A colleague of mine wrote yesterday that the pallium ceremony symbolizes how leadership in the church is out of touch, because this event is about your connection with the pope whereas what really ought to be important is your connection with the people. How do you react to that?

Well, the bishop is not a congressman. You know, sometimes when I make a statement on immigration reform, I'll get a nasty letter from someone saying you don't represent me because I don't think that illegal aliens should be legalized or anything like that. I usually write back and say, you're right, I don't represent you, but I'm not supposed to. I'm not supposed to speak for you, I'm supposed to speak to you as a teacher of the church. Just as we're not representatives of Roman Catholicism Inc., we're also not congressmen or senators. We're not given our voice by the votes of the people. It's a whole different type of relationship.

It's also true, isn't it, that most of your time on this trip isn't spent with the pope? Most of it is with the people from your diocese who came with you.

That's right. I brought over 250 pilgrims. My time is mostly spent with them, partly because of my gratitude to them for accompanying me and their support of me. I have about an equal number of people from my former diocese, Orlando, as are coming from the Archdiocese of Miami. I think that shows their respect for the office of bishop, and the fact that they recognize me not as their representative, but as a representative of the successor of the apostles, and that's why they want to be here with me.

You didn't come over here to get away from your people?

No, I've never done that. You have to know your people and they have to know you. That means you spend time with them, you listen to them, and you hope they listen to you.

On the national scene in the States, you're known for your leadership on the immigration issue. Where does your passion for that issue come from?

My father was an immigrant. He was born in Poland and immigrated to the United States when he was about two years old. I think that has given me empathy for the immigrant experience. Then when I was a young seminarian, I learned Spanish in the seminary, because I thought I was going to be working with Cuban refugees in Miami. I did that in my early years of priesthood, but very quickly I also started learning Haitian Creole and I spent 18 years working with Haitians in South Florida.

In the 1980s, the Haitians had very difficult times because of an immigration policy that was discriminating against them. At the same time, I saw people that I had received at my church, with their pants still wet with sea water because they had just got off the boat, and ten years later I'm blessing houses they had bought and watching their children go off to college. They were living the American dream.

Immigration has always been a part of the history of this country, and more importantly it's been a part of the history of the Catholic church in this country. I think some of the anti-immigrant feeling that we're experiencing in this country is just a revival of the Know-Nothing movement of the past, which sometimes was a veiled anti-Catholicism. That makes me even more upset where I hear Catholics spouting anti-immigrant things, because they've forgotten their history, and it's a history that's maybe only one generation removed from where they are today.

You know well that the Vatican's role in Haiti has been controversial, and at one point during the Aristide years the Vatican embassy was actually stormed in protest. What do you make of the role the Vatican has played in Haiti over the years?

The Vatican was the first political entity to recognize the independence of Haiti in 1840, before the United States did and before many of the other nations of the world did. I think Haitians recognize that, and they're I think grateful for it. When other countries wouldn't recognize the independence of Haiti because it was made up of former slaves, the Vatican did.

Over the years, there were tensions between church and state. In the 1960s, the Duvalier regime exiled the bishop and at the same time the Vatican agreed to appoint Haitian natives as bishops. Haitians will argue about whether some of those bishops were less than effective, in part because sometimes 'effective' meant passing the government's muster. That's a question for history to decide.

The more recent accusation is that the Vatican actively undercut the Aristide government.

I think the truth of that is that Aristide is probably more to blame for undercutting his own government than any other force. We're almost a decade removed now from that.

Do you think the backlash against the Vatican during the Aristide years was manufactured?

It wasn't manufactured, because the people who were supportive of Aristide the first time he was ousted were angry that the first recognition of the de facto regime was the arrival of the papal nuncio. That caused a lot of controversy at the time. I think that's been surmounted now.

Looking back, do you think that was part of the Vatican's effort to engage Haiti, whoever happened to be in charge?

Exactly. A lot of people made a polemical point about it ?

It fit a larger script, which was the Vatican crackdown on liberation theology.

Exactly. But you can't look at Haiti today without recognizing the role the Catholic church has played and continues to play in that country, in terms of education, health care, foreign assistance, and so on. The church plays a big role in Haiti, and will continue to do so. Right now, the nuncio there, who I know very well and he's a very important person, plays an important role in trying to assure that the broader community remembers Haiti as they try to rebuild in the aftermath of the earthquake.

You know that there was some controversy about who should run the show in the Catholic relief effort in Haiti, whether it would be Caritas or Catholic Relief Services, and so on. Now that the dust has settled, are you satisfied that the relief effort is being run properly?

I hope to learn more about that. During this visit I hope to visit Caritas Internationalis and discuss what they're doing now. I also will be going back to Haiti at the end of July. I was there over Easter week, and just a week ago Cardinal McCarrick was down there in Haiti discussing how the American church can be of assistance in rebuilding some of the church structures that were destroyed. I think there is a good sense of collaboration among the different Catholic donor groups, and I expect it to continue.

The biggest problem there isn't the outside groups and who's doing what. It's rebuilding the capacity of the local church. We have to support the local church's ability to respond to local needs, and to do that we have to grow their own capacity. I think there's some good progress being made in that area over the last couple of months.

Bringing the focus back to the States, the demographics of the American church are changing fast. By 2030, white Catholics for the first time will no longer be a statistical majority ? they'll 48 percent, Hispanics 41 percent, Asians almost eight percent, and so on.

It sounds like the breakdown of the population of the Archdiocese of Miami.

Are we going back to our roots ? once again a blue-collar, ethnic, immigrant church?

Certainly the church in the United States is once again becoming an immigrant church. It was always considered to be an immigrant church until after World War II. We've had a generation or so go by, and now we're rediscovering the fact that one of the things that continues to make the church in the United States dynamic is immigration. It's coming not only from South America, but also Asia, with incredible levels of immigration from Vietnam and the Philippines, and also some from old Europe, with Polish immigrants and so on, not to mention Africa. These new groups continue to revitalize our churches.

Is that shifting the social and political priorities of the Catholic church in America?

I'm not sure if it's shifting them, but maybe it's helping them to be regrounded in what the priorities have always been. For a good part of our history in the United States, our priority was receiving and helping to integrate newcomers. If for thirty or forty years we forgot about that, we're being reminded.

You've jokingly said that the great thing about Miami is that it's so close to the United States.

I told that to the pope this morning ? he laughed.

What does the multicultural reality of Miami have to teach to the broader church in the States?

It can teach in somewhat the same way that places like Los Angeles and New York do as well, that immigrants are not a problem but oftentimes a solution to the challenges of growth and evangelization. There was a book written in the 1980s by a guy named T.D. Allman called Miami: The City of the Future. He described the excitement of Miami at that time as being unparalleled. He argued that New York was the 1940s, the 50s were Los Angeles, the 60s were Houston, the 70s were the San Francisco area, and he said the 80s were Miami. It probably still is Miami, in the sense of showing in a great way how people can reinvent themselves in a very short amount of time. It also shows how American can help people achieve and become somebody.

The expression is "only in America," but it might be just as true to say, "only in Miami." The Cuban experience, I think, proves it. We've seen that as the Cubans spent more time in Miami, they grew up, they took on business roles and political roles in the community, and it shows perfectly that they're not some un-meltable minority. They became intensely American, and the same can be true for other groups today.

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