

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 6, 2010 at 10:58am

Q&A with Fr. Joseph Tobin

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic



Elevating another American to a senior Vatican position, Pope Benedict XVI on Monday named Redemptorist Fr. Joseph Tobin as the new secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, colloquially known as the "Congregation for Religious." It's the office with lead responsibility for some 190,000 religious priests and brothers, and roughly 750,000 sisters, worldwide.

The Superior General of the Redemptorists from 1997 to 2009, Tobin, 58, becomes an archbishop by virtue of the appointment.

Tobin joins a cohort of Americans on the top rungs of Benedict's Vatican, including:

- Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith
- Archbishop Augustine Di Noia, secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments
- Archbishop James Harvey, prefect of the Papal Household
- Msgr. Peter Wells, assessor in the Secretariat of State
- Archbishop Raymond Burke, prefect of the Apostolic Signatura

On a personal level, Tobin is generally viewed as about as moderate as they come, and someone who prides himself on being able to see matters from a wide range of cultural and intellectual perspectives. He comes out of the traditional mainstream of religious life, thereby representing established orders who sometimes felt a bit neglected under John Paul II in favor of the new movements.

Given that background, Tobin could become an informal point of reference in the Vatican for various constituencies in the church that sometimes feel disenfranchised.

Tobin was born into an Irish-Catholic family in Detroit, which among other things made him a fan of the Red Wings, Lions, Tigers and Pistons -- producing, as he puts it, "lots of scar tissue on my heart." He got to know the Redemptorists, who ran a parish just a block away from his house, and joined the order -- technically, the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, founded by St. Alphonsus Liguori in 1732.

After ordination to the priesthood in 1978, Tobin worked in Hispanic ministry in Detroit and Chicago. He was called to Rome to serve as the consulter general of the Redemptorists in 1991. (Tobin told me the move was especially frustrating because he was part of an evening hockey league in Chicago, and obviously Rome is not a major hockey town. Tobin eventually found a couple of Canadians in Rome who seemed to have a lead on a temporary rink someplace, but nothing came of it.)

He was elected superior general of the Redemptorists in 1997, and re-elected in 2003. During that span, Tobin became a leader among religious in Rome, serving in key positions within the Union of Superiors General, the major umbrella group for men's orders. He also sat on the "Council of the Sixteen," composed of eight male superiors and eight female, who meet on a regular basis with the Congregation for Religious. After 12 years at the helm of the Redemptorists, which included a grueling schedule of travel around the world, Tobin was savoring a sabbatical year at Oxford when Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, called to scramble his life once again.

While career-minded clergy might look upon being named the secretary of a Vatican congregation as a plum, in truth it's sometimes a thankless gig. The secretary is the official responsible for making the trains run on time, and it's also usually the guy who gets the blame when things go wrong, while the cardinal-prefect takes the credit for whatever goes well.

In Tobin's case, the assignment is even more complicated for two reasons.

First, he comes into the job at a moment of transition. The congregation's current prefect, Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, is already past the usual retirement age of 75 and is widely expected to be replaced soon. Thus Tobin can't count on a prefect to provide continuity while he gets up to speed; on the contrary, fairly soon Tobin will be expected to run the show while a new prefect learns the ropes.

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Second, he steps into a congregation with a couple of fires already burning. The Congregation for Religious is responsible for the controversial Apostolic Visitation of American nuns, expected to run through 2011, and it also oversaw the visitation of the Legionaries of Christ that led to Pope Benedict's recent decision to appoint an Apostolic Delegate for the order. The delegate, Italian Archbishop Velasio De Paolis, is a member of the Congregation for Religious.

I reached Tobin by phone on Tuesday at his mother's home in Ontario, Canada, just before he left for

Long Beach, Calif., to attend a meeting of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men. We discussed his new role, the women's visitation, the Legionaries, and other subjects.

Tobin said he expects to be on the job by early September. The following is a transcript of our conversation. (Also read Allen's news story from Wednesday: **New Vatican leader 'extremely positive' on women.**)

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Aside from basic biographical information, what should people know about you?

I think it's important that I've always worked outside the culture of my birth. Since my initial formation, I've never lived in a primarily Irish-American setting. I worked in Hispanic ministry for 13 years, and then moved into a multicultural situation based in Rome which included travel all around the world. You never leave behind what you were initially, of course, but the experiences of my life have helped me to see the incredible richness and catholicity of the church. That's an important part of who I am.

Why did you decide to join the Redemptorists?

We lived one block away from a Redemptorist parish on the southwest side of Detroit. They visited our house, they were in the streets, and they played ball with us. They always seemed to want to work on the other side of the tracks, and I found that very attractive. They offered me an ideal, and of course friendships were very important.

When did you first come to Rome?

It was in 1991, when I was elected consulter general. To tell the truth, I wasn't very happy about it. I was working in Chicago at the time, in a Hispanic parish, and I loved it. Among other things, I was playing hockey at night in a local rink, and going to Rome meant I had to give that up.

When did you first get wind of your appointment as Secretary of the Congregation for Religious?

I learned about it a couple of weeks ago. There had been all sorts of rumors, but you know as well as I do that in Rome, rumors and a Euro will get you a ride on the bus! I had basically discounted the talk, because I hadn't heard it from anybody 'official.' Anyway, I was quite happy doing my sabbatical at Oxford.

Then two weeks ago, I was at my mom's house in Ontario when the phone rang. The voice on the other end said it was Cardinal Bertone, and my first thought was that it was a prank - you know, I thought maybe it was one of the Redemptorists fooling around. Quickly, though, I realized that it really was Bertone, and he said that the Holy Father wants you to do this. My first reaction was to tell him that off the top of my head, I could give him the names of five people much more qualified to do this job than I am. I was completely serious about it. But Cardinal Bertone said no, this is what the Holy Father wants. He said I could take a week to ten days to think about it, so I talked to my superiors, my closest friends in religious life, and my spiritual director. To be honest, it was hard at first to take this seriously, to realize that it was actually happening.

Had you known Bertone before?

I met him a number of times while he was the number two guy at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and usually it was in the company of the Cardinal-prefect [at the time, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger,

now Pope Benedict XVI.] Typically it wasn't a happy moment, because it meant that some Redemptorist was on the congregation's radar screen! Other than that, I haven't had any contact with Bertone, other than a brief hello at a Synod of Bishops or something like that.

Any sense of why you?

I asked that question of Cardinal Bertone, in terms of what they're expecting from me. I think a large part of it is that I have personal experience of one form of consecrated life, as well as the experience over the years of listening to people representing many other varieties of consecrated life. I've had fairly wide contacts both with women's and men's orders. I also know something about how consecrated women and men have interfaced with this dicastery, because I've served on the rather ominous-sounding "Council of the Sixteen," which includes eight male and eight female superiors general who meet with the congregation.

I also wonder if the fact that I'm an American has something to do with it. There's a great deal of misunderstanding among American religious about the decisions of the Holy See, and in particular the visitation of women religious. I feel I can bring something to that, because I've worked all my life with women's religious. They taught me when I was a kid, and my mother's family was very close to the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters. I've preached women's retreats and listened a lot to them over the years. Maybe I can offer a different picture of American women religious than the one that has been presented in Rome. My own impression is extremely positive.

Beyond that, I like being with a wide variety of people, talking with people who represent other ways of thinking and other cultural mindsets. I hope that serves me well in this assignment.

Over the years there's been tension between the Vatican and some of the traditional orders and groups in religious life, such as the Union of Superiors General. You're a veteran of the USG, so does your appointment signal healing?

I hope so, and I guess I would be inclined to read it that way. For decades, there's been a sort of mysterious breach between the Union of Superiors General and the Vatican ... "mysterious" in the sense that no one could quite explain what caused it. The USG tried unsuccessfully for years to get an audience with the Holy Father under John Paul II. To his credit, when Benedict XVI was elected, he met with both the women and the men. That showed some openness to dialogue. I guess you could say my appointment moves in the same direction ... at least, it's as good an explanation as any! I have been heavily involved in numerous projects of the USG, including an international congress on religious life in 2004 that was more or less boycotted by the Vatican. Maybe this appointment amounts to a kind of rehabilitation.

You mention the visitation of religious women in the United States. Many people will look at your appointment and ask if it has any significance for that process. Do you think it does?

I think so. Maybe it suggests some awareness of just how badly this thing has gone down. This week I'll be attending the meeting of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men in Long Beach, California, and some of the officers of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious will be there. It's my intention to meet with them, to talk about how we can bring life from this. I want to have a frank discussion to help me shape my thinking and whatever proposals I might bring to the congregation.

Another high-profile project in which the congregation has been involved is the visitation of the Legionaries, which led to the appointment of an apostolic visitor. Do you expect to play a role in that?

The visitor has a pretty complete set of faculties to deal with the situation, but I imagine that at some point he'll make recommendations to the congregation. I'm sure the dicastery will want to stay informed.

As you know, a house of cards has been constructed in the media and elsewhere to portray Benedict XVI as somehow uncaring or soft on clerical sexual misconduct, but it has to answer the point that one of the first things he did as pope was to deal with Maciel. That action spoke volumes, because I had been in Rome and I saw the incredible clout Maciel had. The fact that Benedict did it, and did it quickly, was a clear signal that the pope is serious about correcting this thing.

Theologically and spiritually, I think the Legionaries face enormous challenges, given how much religious life tends to stress the person and the inspiration of the founder.

Are you aware of any precedent for these kinds of revelations about a founder?

No, I know of no other experience like this. Theologically and even affectively, it's a massive blow, given the regard that people in religious communities have for their founder. In the Redemptorists, we often talk about St. Alphonsus Liguori as "Our Holy Father," and I know the Dominicans talk the same way about Dominic, or the Brothers of the Christian Schools the same way about Jean-Baptiste de La Salle. I honestly don't know what you do about it. I know there's support for the Legionaries in Rome, so it will be interesting to see how this is done. I certainly don't feel any *schadenfreude* about what's happening ... I know it's terribly painful.

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