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Time will tell whether new Vatican head is a 'Yes' man

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Cardinal Marc Ouellet, previously archbishop of Quebec and primate of Canada, was recently appointed the new head of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops. On July 30 he became the Vatican official who makes the final recommendation to the pope regarding appointments to or within the Catholic hierarchy.

Ouellet has been described as a close friend of Pope Benedict XVI -- a friendship which at least one Canadian commentator regards as an asset for the job.

According to a recent article in Canada's *National Post*, Jesuit Fr. Jacques Monet, a church historian based in Toronto, believes that the longstanding relationship between the cardinal and the pope will not compromise Ouellet's independence and influence. Monet says Ouellet will not just be a 'yes man.'

But that has not been the case with regard to another high-ranking Vatican official, Cardinal William Levada -- the pope's successor as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). The pope selected him for the post because they had established a close relationship while Levada worked at the CDF several years earlier.

No Vatican observer would claim that Levada is someone of independent influence in the Roman Curia or that he occasionally finds himself saying 'no' to the pope.

What sort of perspective will Ouellet bring to the Congregation of Bishops? Will he mark out a new course for episcopal appointments or are we likely to see a continuation of the pattern already laid down by Pope John Paul II and now Benedict XVI?

In my judgment it will be 'No' to the second question, and 'Yes' to the third.

When commenting on the greatest crisis to confront the Catholic Church since the Reformation of the 16th century, Ouellet seemed to blame the scandal of sexual abuse in the priesthood on the weakening of moral standards in society -- a common explanation given by those who are reluctant to address the internal problems of the church, including obligatory clerical celibacy, the role of women, and the declining quality of pastoral leadership.

Ouellet's rightist views manifested themselves most dramatically, however, in his comments on the Second Vatican Council. In his interview with Charles Lewis of the *National Post* in mid-August, he expressed the belief that many Catholics interpreted the teachings of Vatican II in far too liberal a fashion and in the process disconnected those teachings from the core of Catholic faith.

That liberal misinterpretation of the council, Ouellet said, led to priests abandoning celibacy, a drop in proper religious education, and a general infusion of leftist politics -- all against the true intentions of Vatican II.

After the council, he pointed out, the sense of mission was replaced by the idea of dialogue. That we should dialogue with other faiths and not attempt to bring them the Gospels, to convert. Since then, relativism has been developing more broadly.

Ouellet is a long-time editor of and contributor to the theological journal *Communio*, which was established by conservative theologians to serve as a counter-weight to the international theological journal *Concilium*, founded and edited by some of the leading theologians at Vatican II

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That list included Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, and even Joseph Ratzinger -- now Pope Benedict XVI -- who contributed an important article on the doctrinal authority of national episcopal conferences for the first issue of the journal.

Ouellet, however, looks upon Hans Urs von Balthasar, not Karl Rahner, as the leading Catholic theologian of the 20th century.

In the area of liturgy he has expressed a devotional preference for eucharistic adoration and a return to the use of Gregorian chant.

Charles Lewis pointed out in his brief profile of Ouellet that the cardinal had been severely criticized by some in Canada for saying that abortion is morally wrong even in the case of rape.

In an attempt to heal the wounds opened by his remarks (but without retracting them), he held a joint press conference with Archbishop Terrence Prendergast of the Ottawa archdiocese calling upon those on both sides of the issue to work together toward reducing the number of abortions.

Ouellet's effort at healing wounds in that case is to be applauded. Whether such a sense of moderation will also extend to his role in the appointment of bishops remains to be seen.

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