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Q & A: Rocco Palmo

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Distinctly Catholic

As mentioned, all this week at Q & A, Rocco Palmo, whose blog *Whispers in the Loggia* is a must read on both sides of the Atlantic, is answering questions about the state of the Catholic Church.

The question: Who is an up-and-coming bishop we should keep an eye on and why?

Rocco Palmo: Picking just one ?up and comer? among the bench?s new crop is kinda like the potato chip ad -- ?you can?t have just one.?

Being accustomed to its sprawling nature, many of us tend to give it short shrift, but globally speaking, the US church is an immense enterprise -- only Italy and Brazil have more bishops, and given the scope of the turf here, it?s impossible to boil the situation down into a single column because, well, the culture of Catholicism in New England and New Mexico are two drastically different things.

As much as ever, the story of this moment in the American Catholic journey is that of divergent realities of East and West -- only now, the latter finds itself in the driver?s seat of the national fold?s future... with, in a scenario that defies all precedent, the South riding shotgun. For those of us who like looking at things through the lens of history, this is nothing short of an epochal shift, and God knows it makes for fascinating watching.

All that said, back to the main point: on a bench that counts some 300 active bishops and sees turnover all the time, I can?t really narrow my mind down to one rising star. And maybe that?s a fitting reflection on the conference?s dynamic at this point in the game. See, the days of one ?strongman? bishop as the church?s National Anchor -- a line extending back to John Carroll, then John Hughes and James Gibbons -- ended when John Cardinal O?Connor passed from our midst. Some have hoped for a restoration of the ?New York tradition? under his latest successor, but for all Archbishop Tim Dolan?s

considerable gifts, all of a decade since the Lion of Madison Avenue departed the stage, the world (and, yes, the church in America) has quickly become a very different place: more than anything else, the evolution of media has busted up the Manhattan-based monopoly on the national conversation, granting a thousand bishops (or so it sometimes seems) entree into a wider view; even more than the the scandals, the polarization within the USCCB (only ever increased in 2002's wake) would see any one viewpoint quickly and prominently rebutted -- and we all know how the mainstream press loves a good ad intra spat, eh?; the demographic center's double-whammy flight toward Hispanics and the West (expedited by a hemorrhaging of Anglos) has stripped the Northeast of its historic standing as the Stateside church's de facto flagship... you get the idea.

In a changed conference leading a changing church -- and one fallen on harder times than any of us have ever experienced -- the need for effective, credible, savvy leadership only becomes all the more pressing. And while this observer still hasn't a clue what way the body will swing come mid-November in Baltimore as it elects its next vice-president -- a race that, thanks to all the new blood in the electorate, feels more up in the air than it's been in quite some time -- here are a couple names readers might well find guiding the high-hat fold as it journeys on over the years and decades ahead.

(For the record, tempting as it was to include earlier -- read: JP II -- picks most armchair church-watchers would still see as "up and comers," the group below were all still priests at Benedict XVI's election and only named bishops once the pope got the selection process working his way.)

Paul Etienne, 51, bishop of Cheyenne: As the current state of things has made being a bishop a brutally tough job, "within reach of power tools" is probably the last place you'd want a nominee to be on learning of his appointment. But, indeed, it was while chopping down trees on a Monday off last year that Etienne got the call telling him that B16 had named him to head Wyoming's statewide diocese, which had been vacant for over two years. Luckily, the rural Indiana pastor didn't harm himself at hearing the news, accepted, and in retrospect, the moment vindicated the wisdom of the selection process: if you're seeking a good fit for Wyoming, someone whose idea of relaxing is cutting trees (and who gave his priest-brothers hunting rifles as ordination gifts) would be hard to beat. And true to form, on his first swings around the sprawling diocese, the bishop's been said to keep a flyfishing rod in the back of his truck, pulling over to use it as time and finding a good stream allow.

Keeping with the "golden thread" highlighted yesterday, Etienne was pastoring two country churches when the nuncio's call came; one of them was his boyhood parish, his parents still living within its bounds. On a farewell tour of his prior assignments before heading West, each Mass was packed and said to be notably emotional. But behind the country angle lies a veteran of the national scene, perhaps in ways some Catholic conversationalists might find curious.

Such is the current bleeding of secular politics into the ecclesial discourse of late that, most days, you'll easily find someone or other's calling for the detonation of the USCCB, citing this or that passage of Joseph Ratzinger's writings. Then again, one thing the pope would've noticed in Etienne's file is that, while on a leave from the seminary in the mid-'80s, the future bishop found his way onto the staff of the old NCCB/USCC in its full-tilt heyday. Clearly, Benedict saw that as anything but a deal-breaker (and accordingly, not long after his appointment, Etienne landed on one of the Mothership's most work-intensive, high profile committees these days -- Child and Youth Protection.)

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More to the point, the young bishop of Yellowstone Country brings a refreshing shot of openness to the

table; performing his first priestly ordination, he preached about his own struggles with celibacy, he blogs daily, and a recently-released vision statement for the diocese saw the bishop speak of his longtime "ache" over the numbers of inactive Catholics and call for a new spirit of outreach.

"For God's family to be whole," Etienne wrote, "we need to do all we can to reach out.... We need to listen to their stories and experiences and, where possible, help them find healing and wholeness. We need to do all we can to help them take up their rightful place within our practicing family of faith once again."

As a progressive friend in Wyoming recently put it, with the new boss' arrival, "the Council has finally arrived" in the Cheyenne church.

Daniel Flores, 49, bishop of Brownsville: Usually, the head of one of the nation's 15 dioceses with a million or more Catholics wouldn't stack up as a potential talent for the future, but as someone who's already made the top tier. Yet when it comes to the guy known at home as "Bishop Danny," one can't help but see even bigger things ahead.

As noted yesterday, before the South Texas-born prelate's December return from Detroit after braving "three winters" as an auxiliary there, no Hispanic cleric of any age had ever been given a Stateside diocese of a million-plus, and no Anglo Statesider still in his 40s had been named to a see so massive since Roger Mahony's triumphant LA homecoming a quarter-century ago this month. That alone should underscore the degree of great expectations Rome has for the 49 year-old who's quickly become one of the most intense, brilliant, charismatic figures in the Stateside church's emerging generation of leadership, even if his national profile has yet to take off.

Able to quote verbatim from Thomas in Latin, Tolkien in English and Sinatra in song, with an enjoyment for penning poetry in his spare time, Flores inherited a border church that's home to the most densely-Catholic population per capita (85%) of any US diocese. And its boom shows no signs of abating; tripled in size since 1980 and doubled since 1990, a majority of today's Brownsville church is younger than age 25. To its north, the archbishopric of San Antonio -- for the last three decades, the single "Hispanic seat" among the nation's senior posts -- might be awaiting its next occupant (and with the "Latin seat" distinction now gone with Archbishop José Gomez to LA, could well see an Anglo successor named to it). Either way, for now, the bench's Latin star reigns by the Rio Grande, and the locals couldn't be happier; at February's installation, some 2,000 people packed into the diocese's Mission Basilica for the Mass.

Impressive as that sounds, it gets better -- another 2,000-plus stood outside.

To have watched Flores is to know this caliber of enthusiasm as pretty much par for the course. As pastor of Corpus Christi Cathedral -- and, at the same time, a commuting vice-rector of Houston's St Mary's Seminary -- prior to his sojourn in Michigan, his base of admirers extended all the way from his former ordinary, Bishop Rene Gracida (whose retirement blog refers to the White House's current occupant as "Barack Hussein Obama?"), to at least one Anglo veteran of the Catholic Worker movement who, during those tense days of the 2008 elections, wrote me to muse that "McCain will find more people to kill if he becomes president"... but only after going on about how much he missed "Danny."

On an ecclesial scene whose ever-warring echo chambers barely seem to agree on Revelation, that breadth of regard says more than anything else possibly could.

Bernard Hebda, 51, bishop of Gaylord: The paper-trail is unusually heady for an American bishop -- Harvard BA, JD from Columbia Law, for 13 years a top-flight Vatican canonist as the #3 official at the

Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts. Ask the folks back in Pittsburgh, though, and you're more likely to hear stories of 'Bernie' Hebda doing the 'electric slide' at parish festivals on return trips to his hometown.

Over his reign, B16's shown a distinct liking for the Steel City, naming three more of its native sons to head dioceses (for a grand total of seven), sending the native-born former ordinary to the nation's capital, bringing back the wildly charismatic Dave Zubik in Don Wuerl's stead, and, in Dan DiNardo, giving the Burgh its first-ever native-son to don the cardinal's red hat.

The judgment's been wise -- if you're rebuilding a bench, Steeler Country's a good place to start; Eastern enough to boast a strong Catholic ethos, but Midwestern enough to be devoid of the ecclesiastical grandeur that's only expedited the church's epic fall along much of the Amtrak/I-95 corridor. Moreover, Pennsylvania's western edge prides itself on its local ties -- and like DiNardo before him, Hebda's yearning to ditch Rome for home became so well-known that, one night a couple years back, a friend in the Canadian hinterlands called to pass along word that 'Bernie wants out,' even if it was never any sort of pontifical secret.

In the end, Hebda only got half his wish -- as opposed to a return to the Burgh, his ticket out of the Vatican saw him dispatched to the northern reaches of Michigan, where the finer points of canon law are about as useful as shorts in December. But the move was no exile -- like most of his fellow appointees under Benedict, Hebda's blood always ran more pastoral than administrative; he spent three years on a pastoral team given the rough task of leading a new parish formed from the closure of seven churches, then led a local college's Catholic center for a year before the fateful call to Curial service came. Seen far more widely as 'brilliant, generous, gentle and pious' than through the lens of ambition -- the latter being, as never before, a verboten quality in Benedict's value-system on the files -- even if it was to a place he'd never been before, simply returning to the trenches made for an especially happy homecoming. Still, the story is just seeing its start.

When DiNardo was named the American South's first-ever Roman prince three years ago, I asked a friend what would happen to the simple 'Council ring' the cardinal-designate received at his 1997 ordination as bishop of Sioux City -- the only bishop's ring he ever wore until the pope slipped the gold bas-relief of the Crucifixion (today's version of the traditional cardinal's sapphire) on his finger.

Quickly, the answer came: 'He's holding it for Bernie.'

After seven happy years in northwestern Iowa's 125,000 miles of cornfields, Pittsburgh's first cardinal was transferred to Texas, and the rest is history. Hebda marks his first anniversary in Gaylord come December... and for the rest, see you in 2016, or sometime thereabout.

David O'Connell CM, 55, coadjutor-bishop of Trenton: As the dust kicked up by the church's battle royal over health-care reform was still settling, at the episcopal ordination of a figure viewed by his critics as an arch-conservative, one face particularly stuck out in a front pew: the bishops' bete noire of the reform fight, the president of the Catholic Health Association Sr Carol Keehan.

The move was vintage David O'Connell. Policy spat, hell or high water, nothing would get in the way of inviting his close friend of three decades to sit alongside his family -- and, later, be offered a dinner seat alongside the Vatican delegation in attendance -- as, after years of widespread chatter over where the 14th president of the Catholic University of America would end up, the Philly-born Vincentian landed in an unsung gem of the downtrodden Northeast: Central Jersey's 850,000-member diocese, home to a vibrant presbyterate, the nation's second-largest crop of permanent deacons, nationally-recognized lay ministry efforts and, all around, a warm, happy, energized local church.

In case any readers have been living under a rock, the successor to the beloved Bishop Mort Smith is anything but your typical rookie high-hat. For starters, while most new bishops walk the Vatican's inner halls like kids on their first trip to Disney World, O'Connell's tenure leading the nation's top pontifical institute made him a familiar presence there -- and his hosting of the pope during Benedict's 2008 visit to Washington isn't just warmly recalled by those of us who listened to the pontiff's speech. The same spirit of esteem is shared the bishops for whom, until joining them on his June appointment, he worked, and proof positive of their enduring goodwill is already well on the table: in stunning speed, this year's November ballot for USCCB committee posts already has O'Connell in a head-to-head for the chair of one of the conference's key task-groups -- Catholic education, what else?

Sure, he's anything but a stranger to the Floor at the 'Fall Classic' -- even if he'd rather be singing karaoke down in the lounge -- but not in memory has a prelate been chosen to stand for a committee chairmanship before attending his first November Meeting as a bishop. Then again, the last time an American priest began his episcopacy with O'Connell's kind of mega-watt prominence, his name was Tim Dolan. Unlike the new Trentonian, though, even now, the archbishop of New York can't claim the words 'CNN analyst' on his CV.

As a final caveat, there are two other newly-elevated, pastorally sound American prelates who'll likely be key leaders on the road ahead... for now, though, they're not members of the Stateside bench -- at least, not yet. Of course, this refers to the two States-born archbishops now serving in the Roman Congregations -- the elegant, Yale-trained theologian (and B16 favorite) Gus DiNoia OP at Divine Worship, and the 'Congregation for Religious' just-named 'ray of hope,' the former Redemptorist general Joe Tobin, who'll be ordained next month in St Peter's Basilica.

Most of the time, Vatican practice dictates that archbishop-secretaries of dicasteries tend not to be 'lifers,' and end up being given high posts at home, so smart money would expect at least one to return at some point down the line. While a lot can change in two or three years, one prediction's already hit the ground, and it makes sense: given the latter's Midwestern roots, penchant for collaboration, experience in Rome running a large, complex ecclesial apparatus on top of his ministry-long care for a Hispanic church whose language he speaks fluently, once Tobin's done bringing the controversial and turbulent Apostolic Visitation of the nation's women religious in for a smooth landing on all sides, the early line has already advanced him as a strong contender for Chicago in succession to Cardinal Francis George, who reaches the retirement age of 75 in early 2012.

Lest anyone forgot, the Windy City can easily recall a successful shepherd who introduced himself as 'Joseph, your brother'... and suffice it to say, an encore might be just what the doctor ordered.

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