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Does Dolan's election signify a Catholic 'Tea Party' movement?

by Maureen Fiedler

NCR Today

When the news broke yesterday that Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York had unexpectedly defeated Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson for President of the U.S. Bishops' Conference, we at *Interfaith Voices* scrambled to find out why. We called on Kevin Eckstrom of Religion News Service, a veteran church-watcher.

While Kevin certainly affirmed that Dolan's considerable public skills as a communicator and his affable personality helped his election, he also pointed out that there was a concerted, well organized campaign by ultra-conservatives in the church to defeat Kicanas and elect Dolan. This campaign had little to do with style and everything to do with substance.

In fact, it looks like our very own Catholic version of the "Tea Party" movement.

While those opposed to Kicanas' election hammered away online and by fax about a case in which Kicanas ordained a sex abuser to the priesthood about two decades ago, that case has been known for a long time. And there aren't many bishops with clean hands on that issue anyway.

The real issue for these conservatives was not sex abuse, but the fact that they apparently could not stomach a bishop like Kicanas who might actually give some voice to the social justice teachings of the church, rather than using his office exclusively as a megaphone in the culture wars -- specifically on the issues of gay marriage and abortion.

It's not that there is any daylight between Dolan and Kicanas on these issues, it's just that Dolan gives them a much greater public emphasis.

And the new vice-president of the conference is Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, another 'culture warrior' who focuses on the gay marriage issue.

As Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese pointed out in his analysis this morning, during their meeting the bishops said nothing about the current recession and the fact that about 10 percent of their parishioners are unemployed.

Nor are the bishops addressing pressing issues of justice and peace on the agenda of this lame duck session of Congress -- like ratification of the START treaty reducing our nuclear weapons stockpile, ending tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans (a justice issue, clearly), or passing the DREAM Act to get a start on immigration reform.

And the bishops probably wonder why studies show that Catholics are leaving the church in droves. Could it be that the hierarchy no longer speaks to them or for them?

For more coverage of Archbishop Timothy Dolan's election as head of the U.S. Bishops, see:

- Jerry Filteau's news story: **Spurning tradition, Bishops elect Dolan as new president**
- Michael Sean Winters' analysis: **What happened in Baltimore**
- Maureen Fiedler's take: **Does Dolan's election signify a Catholic 'Tea Party' movement?**
- Ken Briggs' commentary: **Amidst Dolan hubbub, easy to forget bishops are virtually powerless**

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