

Amidst Dolan hubbub, easy to forget bishops are virtually powerless

Ken Briggs | Nov. 17, 2010 NCR Today

COMMENTARY

American media like church politics that slant vertically. They prefer top-down arrangements where authority flows from undisputed head to the obedient limbs. That makes it easier to define officially who's in and who's out, how to identify the approved teachings and to whom to show deference.

In theory, at least, the Catholic church has fit that description.

The line of command has seemed set, rulers are clearly distinguished from followers and dogma is what the pope says it is. Democratic religion, by contrast, is messy and fuzzy and isn't nearly so easy to cover. Its politics are rarely covered.

Real life isn't that way for Catholics, of course, and the election of Archbishop Timothy Dolan points up the ambiguities that creep in.

His election is being treated as a monumental shift in the destiny of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He is being portrayed as the powerhouse, shades of that media favorite, Cardinal Spellman, a prelate who will take the reins and guide the conference toward a reversal of its sagging fortunes.

Lost in this hubbub is the fact that Dolan will be taking over an association of bishops that has been greatly weakened by John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The downgrading of bishops' conferences around the world followed a period after Vatican II when the conferences, spurred on by the Council, became friskier, bolder and more independent from Rome's control. The idea that local (national) churches should heed the signs of the times of their own surroundings was temporarily in full bloom.

It was during that period of two decades that the U.S. bishops wrote their most memorable pastoral letters, one on the nuclear arms race, the other on the nation's economy that underscored the shame of poverty.

They were heading for a third letter on women but that effort ended in perhaps inevitable shambles. By then, John Paul II had begun to curb the growing initiatives by the conferences on grounds that conferences had assumed authority that rightfully belonged to Rome. Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was his able assistant in that effort.

From then to now, the conference's ability to do anything on its own has been virtually suspended. The conference does nothing that isn't rubber stampable by the Vatican.

Stripped of nearly all autonomy, the U.S. conference does the bidding of its hierarchical superiors. Dolan can act at best as a polished ambassador who can employ persuasion but doesn't set policy. His advice to Rome will most certainly serve to formulate strategies to convince wary Catholics that the church has been right all along rather than to challenge the policies of church authorities in the name of American Catholic insight.

It strikes me that a conference with a measure of trusted autonomy would stand a much better chance of engaging the skepticism and disagreements of the Catholic laity than does a conference that reflexively bends to the will of its superiors.

Dolan, his qualities as an old fashioned ward heeler already being advertised, will presumably be a media favorite. He will have the look and sound of a larger-than-life leader at the helm who takes charge and forges new pathways. In fact, he will take over a conference whose ability to take substantive new initiatives has been much diminished and whose role has been reduced to effective marketing of immovable objects.

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](#) [1]
- Michael Sean Winters' analysis: [What happened in Baltimore](#) [2]
- Maureen Fiedler's take: [Does Dolan's election signify a Catholic 'Tea Party' movement?](#) [3]
- Ken Briggs' commentary: [Amidst Dolan hubbub, easy to forget bishops are virtually powerless](#) [4]

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