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Much-praised pastor becomes a bishop

Tom Roberts | Dec. 20, 2010

Cardinal William Levada, former San Francisco archbishop, places his hands on Auxiliary Bishop Robert McElroy during his ordination Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco Sept. 7. (CNS/Catholic San Francisco/Jose Luis Aguirre)

SAN MATEO, CALIF. -- In mid-July, Catholic circles in the Bay Area were buzzing with the news about Msgr. Robert McElroy of St. Gregory Parish in San Mateo. The fifth-generation San Franciscan had just been named an auxiliary bishop of the archdiocese.

It is not unusual for locals to express great pride when one of their own -- someone who?s been a priest and pastor for decades among them -- receives a promotion to the hierarchical ranks.

The reaction to McElroy?s appointment, however, was somewhat beyond the usual. In meetings with groups of Catholics in the region for quite other reasons, this visitor kept hearing about McElroy.

From Catholics deeply involved in the church of San Francisco to academics and fellow priests to old hands in the press, the reactions to his appointment -- almost always unsolicited -- ran along two main tracks: He?s a terrific pastor who knows how to listen and negotiate and arrive at consensus (and gives great sermons, as well), and he?s a brilliant man with a pile of advanced degrees. He also leaves a trail of writings on topics such as war and peace and opposing use of the Eucharist as a sanction against politicians -- stands that are rarely on the resumés (at least openly) of rising stars in the universe of the episcopacy.

The assessments of his intellectual heft came from a range of people, not least among them Jesuits teaching at several of the institutions of higher learning they maintain in the Bay area. And Dominican Fr. Michael Sweeney, president of the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley, Calif., who worked with McElroy on developing lay leadership in the archdiocese, described him in an interview with *Catholic San Francisco* as ?very intelligent -- maybe one of the most intelligent men I know.?

McElroy, who sat down recently in his rectory for a wide-ranging interview with *NCR*, is a big man, tall, with an easy smile and gracious manner. At 56, he retains a certain youthful bookishness about him, an impression that maybe is prompted by his resumé.

He did his undergraduate work at Harvard University, where he earned a bachelor?s degree in history in 1975; a master?s in American history the following year from Stanford University, from which he also received a doctorate in Political Science in 1989. In the interim, he was ordained in 1980, and earned a licenciate of sacred theology from the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley in 1985 and a doctorate in theology from the North American College in Rome in 1987.

His doctoral thesis on the work of Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray was published as a book, *The Search for an American Public Theology*, by Paulist Press. Princeton University Press published his second book, *Morality and American Foreign Policy: The Role of Ethics in International Affairs*, in 1993.

The transition from the academy to life at St. Gregory, where he?s been pastor since 1996, seems to have been seamless. ?When he came here, he first observed, he analyzed, he discussed, and then he suggested positions and got the collaboration of staff and everyone so that it makes sense to everyone,? parish council president Carol James said in a September interview with *Catholic San Francisco*. In recent Lenten projects, said another council member, ?we reached out to the community, the parish community at large, and took on projects that require us to look out beyond our own local community. ... The idea was not to look at our own faith through a very narrow prism but through a broad prism, looking at the world.?

As auxiliary bishop, McElroy will be vicar for Parish Life and Development, a newly created office aimed at promoting the vibrancy of parish life. One of the things he?s discovered in his pastoral work, said McElroy, is that different from 40 years ago when a pastor, several assistant pastors and a secretary made up the parish staff, today that staff is down to one assistant and, depending on the size of the parish ?a full-time DRE [director of religious education], probably someone working in the area of liturgy or RCIA [Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults], a business manager of some role that really runs the administrative or operation life of the parish.?

Upgrading parish staff

It is the latter role that McElroy has worked on developing through classes and training. Of the 87 parishes in the dioceses, 35 pastors have agreed ?to have their key person upgrade to this level? and there are plans to continue the training.

?Our feeling was that traditionally ... there was in fact one key layperson in a parish who was often called the parish secretary who did a lot of those things,? he said. ?So our idea was to upgrade that role and give it a coherent job description and identity and vocational identity.? In working with the Dominican theology school in Berkeley, the archdiocese was able to apply a theology and vocation for the purpose of the new position, which in secular terms might be the equivalent of a chief operating officer. ?We made really clear to the pastors that this doesn?t mean that the direction of the parish is to be taken away from them,? but that the business manager would handle such tasks as budgeting and overseeing all the operational matters, freeing a pastor to concentrate on what spiritual leaders should do best.

One gets a clue to McElroy?s pastoral approach in the language he used in his interview with *Catholic San Francisco* to describe two priests who deeply influenced him. Fr. Gerald Barron, a man he first encountered in his boyhood parish when he was in eighth grade, exhibited ?a lived holiness, transcendent but not otherworldly.? Asked to explain, McElroy said, ?He radiates a kind of holiness in relationship with God, but also a wonderful relatability to people.? Even today, said McElroy, around Barron one senses ?a real union with

God that?s palpable ... and yet he has a great sense of humor. He can be there for people in all different circumstances. He?s nonjudgmental and all those things.?

He described another pastor, Fr. Howie Rasmussen, with whom he served while a deacon, as ?rooted in faith, deeply empathetic, unafraid to lead, quick to console, adept at nurturing, willing to admit mistakes, eager to grow.?

They are the kind of terms that historian Jesuit Fr. John O?Malley, in writing about the Second Vatican Council, describes as ?empowerment language,? differentiating it from ?power language,? or the kind of terms that define and limit and even divide.

Rasmussen, said McElroy, was one of several priests who were influential in his life and ?they all came through the council? and ?updated themselves? with courses at various schools of theology at Berkeley. Empowering as Rasmussen was, McElroy recalls that every once in a while, when the discussion was headed too far out of bounds, he?d say, ?Just remember, the power is here.?

?Every once in a while he would just toss that out. I would say that was a residual thing, but that was good because in the end, he was a very fatherly leader of the parish, in a great sense of that word. ... He wasn?t flawless, but he was a great, empowering, fatherly pastor in the great sense of a father who tries to empower his kids.?

McElroy?s experience in parish life has led him to conclude that ?people want to be supported in general. Yes, you do have to bridge certain divides within parish life because people are all over the place. But at least in a parish like this or the other parishes where I?ve been, people usually aren?t asking you to be with them on every single issue.?

If the other qualities he described are there, he said, ?even if they disagree with the priest on a bunch of stuff, they will find that priest is a helpful leader of their parish community and helpful to them in their life of faith.?

The Eucharist and politics

McElroy?s deep involvement in parish life hasn?t kept him from speaking out on larger national issues, mostly in the form of articles for the Jesuit publication *America*. In January 2005, for instance, his article, ?Prudence and Eucharistic Sanctions,? argued that advocates of depriving the Eucharist to ?Catholic political leaders and voters who depart from the church?s teaching on abortion? raise questions, on four counts, about their ?interpretation of the church?s theology of the Eucharist.?

First, he wrote, the ?sanctions camp? approach ?casts aside all the limitations and admonitions to pastoral solicitude that the church has traditionally demanded in cases of denial of the Eucharist.?

Second, employing a theology that holds that separation from the Eucharist would be an option ?whenever believers have abandoned the fullness of Catholic faith, it seems likely that the number of teachings to which adherence is deemed mandatory for eucharistic eligibility will proliferate.?

Third, he wrote, ?it is manifestly unclear in this new eucharistic theology what level of action is necessary to activate the penalty.? Will it be ?legislative actions? that contravene church teaching? Or will it be voting for a candidate who opposes such teachings, or even ?statements by citizens in public discussions? that trigger such sanctions?

Finally, he said, the sanctions approach ignores that Pope John Paul II had distributed Communion ?on many occasions? to political leaders who favored legalized abortion.

In the article, McElroy counseled prudence, ?the charioteer of virtues? as the Catechism of the Catholic Church defines it, when approaching the issue.

A prudential approach would take into consideration such unintended consequences as the perception among Catholics and non-Catholics alike that the church is being coercive and using the Eucharist ?as a political weapon?; the identification of abortion ?as a sectarian Catholic issue?; and a reduction in the breadth of the church?s social agenda so that one issue, abortion, takes precedence and ?all other issues -- including war and issues of economic justice, over which the United States exercises unparalleled influence because of its political and economic power -- will be relegated to secondary status.?

He concludes by warning that imposing ?eucharistic sanctions will cast the church as a partisan actor in the American political system,? ultimately transforming ?the church in the United States, in the minds of many, into a partisan, Republican-oriented institution and thus sacrifice the role that the church has played almost alone in American society in advocating a moral agenda that transcends the political divide.?

It is one thing for a Msgr. McElroy from San Francisco to write such a piece, but will he maintain that position as a bishop?

?Yes,? he answers. ?The article I wrote? Yes.?

Since the 2004 election, how does he think the bishops have done at arriving at consensus on the issue and rooting that consensus ?firmly in the ancient theological tradition of prudence? as he recommended?

?The way I would assess it is to look at what the bishops who are ordinaries have done. That is, the vast majority of bishops in this country who have political leaders, public officials who are Catholic and who have supported policies that are contrary to the church?s teaching on abortion have not, in fact, publicly barred them from receiving Communion.?

Although a ?small majority? have taken the sanctions position, ?most of them have come to the same ultimate conclusion, whether it?s by the same reasoning or not, that it is not pastorally indicated to make public condemnations of individuals which exclude them from Communion, that the witness of the church, which is an important witness on this question of abortion, is not served well by publicly banning political leaders from receiving Communion.?

One of the loudest voices advocating sanctions against U.S. politicians is Cardinal Raymond Burke, formerly head of the St. Louis archdiocese and currently prefect of the Vatican?s high court. Meanwhile, Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, whose see incorporates the scene of federal deliberations on all the hot-button issues, has refused to use the Eucharist as a political weapon. Burke and Wuerl were made cardinals Nov. 20.

What are Catholics to make of the fact that the two newest U.S. cardinals hold two very different views on the issue?

?I think it?s important,? said McElroy, ?for Catholics to understand ever more fully wherever agreement and disagreement both exist and is appropriate within the church. That is, both those new cardinals agree on the question of the substance of abortion. Both of them agree on the question of public law and abortion, that it should be prohibited in law.

?Where they disagree is on the question of what is the most effective way that the church can witness to the

moral reality of abortion and its implication for public law. ... It?s a disagreement as to strategy and what is most effective. It?s not a disagreement about the moral realities or a disagreement about the law and what law should be or say about abortion.?

For McElroy, the disagreement represents an opportunity for instruction that requires more than a sound bite. ?You can?t even do it in a paragraph, but if you were ready to sit down, it would be to me a very interesting topic for an evening?s discussion of an ecclesiology group in your parish, if you were having a Lenten series on ecclesiology. You could say: ?What does it mean? Where do we agree and disagree, and where is it perfectly fine that we agree and disagree?? ?

A new question about war

In 2007, McElroy wrote a piece in *America* titled ?Why We Must Withdraw From Iraq,? a long and detailed treatment that argues the relevance of the just war tradition in providing ?some light for the Catholic community and the world as a whole about the legitimate use of force in the present age.? He also argues that Catholic tradition ?proceeds from a moral presumption against war.? He concludes by asserting that the ?only moral warrant that emerges from any effort to apply rigorous just-war thinking to Iraq is the warrant to move immediately toward a measured and prudently crafted American military withdrawal.?

He remains convinced that there is a ?trajectory? in the contemporary writings of the magisterium ?toward much more limitation on openness to war, even within the just-war tradition.?

But the seemingly limitless nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan -- wars that now have dragged on longer than any others in U.S. history -- has led him to a new question. ?I?ve been unable to find -- and I?ve looked and looked -- a developed theology within any teaching documents on war termination. In other words, there?s a lot written about what you need to start a war. I can find nothing on when do you have a moral obligation to end your participation in the war.?

It is a question with special relevance to the current age, he believes. Our wealth, along with our willingness to underwrite debt created by war spending, ?allows us to wage war indefinitely,? he said.

It wasn?t the same during the Vietnam era, he said, because of both the draft and the price we paid for spending on war.

Now war can be nearly limitless, he said, and because of the all-volunteer army, human losses are localized, ?as horrible as they are, to a small part of the population.?

Wars can go on indefinitely today because there are no constraints. ?People would prefer we not, but we could do it and it would not be a big drain our nation.? That?s why, he said, the theological and moral question is so important: ?When do you have the obligation to end the war??

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