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Benedict puts his mark on the curia

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Analysis

ROME -- Speculation about Vatican jobs is always a favorite pastime in Rome, and these days the spotlight is on the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, popularly known as the Congregation for Religious, where the incumbent, Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, is past the retirement age of 75.

Sometime after Christmas, Pope Benedict XVI is expected to name a successor. That choice will be watched especially closely in the United States, since it's the office in charge of the current, and highly controversial, apostolic visitation of American nuns (see story).

The bigger picture, however, arguably is this: Once that job is filled, Benedict will have named 21 of the 25 most senior officials of the Roman curia (a list that includes the secretary of state, prefects of nine congregations, presidents of 12 pontifical councils, and heads of three canonical courts). Benedict's "new curia" has therefore come into focus -- and since personnel is policy, these appointments say much about where he's taking the church.

Aside from the unsurprising point that all the pope's men broadly share his commitment to Catholic orthodoxy, three observations seem most pertinent.

First, this pope clearly prefers intellectuals and men of culture to career diplomats or church bureaucrats.

The choice of Quebec Cardinal Marc Ouellet in June as the new prefect of the Congregation for Bishops is emblematic. Ouellet, a Sulpician, is a dogmatic theologian and a former member of the editorial board of *Communio*, a theological journal founded after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) by, among others, then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger.

Benedict seems drawn to intellectual acumen, even when someone's outlook doesn't exactly coincide with his own.

In a recent *NCR* interview, Italian Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, tapped by Benedict as president of the Pontifical Council for Culture in 2007, said he's had the pope's "complete support," even though "I have an intellectual background and a sensitivity that might be slightly different." (Ravasi is a biblical scholar by training, not a theologian, and his references come as much from secular science and literature as the masterpieces of Christian tradition.)

Second, despite repeated efforts from the Vatican to insist that Benedict is not Eurocentric, his curial appointments are top-heavy with Europeans and North Americans. Of the 25 top jobs, only four are held by prelates from outside the West. (One of them, Cardinal Leonardi Sandri of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, was born in Argentina but his family is Italian and he's spent most of his career in Italy.)

That pattern may be less a matter of geographical prejudice than a reflection of Benedict's core policy concern: battling a "dictatorship of relativism" in secular culture, the epicenter of which is Europe.

Even the pope's non-Westerners tend to share that focus on secularism. New Cardinal Robert Sarah, a Guinean tapped in October as president of *Cor Unum*, the Vatican office that oversees the church's charities, delivered strong warnings at the 2009 Synod for Africa about a liberal Western model being imposed on the continent.

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It likely will be left to a future pope to ponder the implications of drawing four-fifths of the church's central government from the West, in a century in which three-quarters of its people will live in the developing world.

Third, Benedict, like leaders in other walks of life, tends to draw top aides from within his comfort zone. At least eight either worked under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, or served as members or consultants of the congregation, and Benedict knows most of the rest from his own curial service.

In his recent book-length interview with Peter Seewald, Benedict explains why he prizes that personal connection.

"It was very important to me as the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for us to be a community, not to fight among or alongside one another, but to be a family," he says. "I set great store by this capacity to foster relationships and to enable teamwork."

Critics have suggested that Benedict's premium on family ties sometimes comes at the expense of competence. The most oft-cited example is the pope's top aide, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone -- an undeniably affable figure, but someone who has presided over a series of administrative crises as secretary of state.

On the other hand, secretaries of state historically have sometimes formed an alternative, and even rival, center of power to the popes they served. Benedict doesn't have to worry about that with Bertone, whose loyalty is unwavering.

One common misimpression is that Benedict prefers the religious orders. Though there are several religious in his Vatican, they currently hold only three of the top 25 jobs. (In the book, Benedict says that ?the religious orders contain a pool of really good people who have great talent,? but denies that the percentage has increased on his watch.)

For better or worse, the outlines of Benedict?s curia seem clear: thinkers, not technocrats; leaders with a Western cultural formation; and team players rather than careerists.

Especially with Ouellet on the job, that might increasingly be the profile of new bishops around the Catholic world as well.

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