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Snubbing Bishop Kicanas

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Catholics who have long since given up on the U.S. bishops as pastoral leaders with a credible moral voice will not care one way or the other about the unprecedented election of Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops last November. Catholics who take the same bishops seriously will have had a favorable reaction to his election, if they took notice of it at all.

If some in the latter group of Catholics accord unusually close attention to such matters, they might have been affected by, and believed, the scurrilous last-minute campaign against Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson that, as a seminary rector, he passed on to the priesthood a sexual abuser.

The New York Times asked for a comment on the election of Dolan, contrary to the tradition that a vice president, in this instance Kicanas, always succeeds to the presidency of the conference whenever the vice president is on the ballot, as Kicanas was. I said simply that, if the bishops did not want Kicanas as their president, they shouldn't have elected him vice president three years ago.

I didn't take into account, however, that in the intervening three years the conference has grown even more conservative, thanks to about 30 new appointments (excluding transfers of bishops from one diocese to another or promotions of auxiliary bishops to ordinaries) that were approved by Pope Benedict XVI.

The "Tea Party" or ultra-conservative wing of the conference felt that they shouldn't have to wait three years to install a genuine conservative in the presidency, and so they (and others) voted for Dolan over Kicanas.

The question is, why didn't Dolan himself wait his turn, withdraw as a candidate, and allow Kicanas to succeed to the presidency of the Conference as every other vice president has done throughout the entire history of the Conference (save two vice presidents who chose not to run)?

That question will haunt Dolan, at least in the minds of the few close-watchers of conference politics. Most U.S. Catholics, however, even New Yorkers, will remain indifferent to the proceedings.

When it is pointed out to them that their archbishop is the new president of the U.S. bishops' conference, the most common reaction would be a shrug of the shoulders and a non-committal "So?"

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, editor-in-chief of the Jesuit weekly *America* before he was sacked in 2005, observed in his blog for *Newsweek* and *The Washington Post* (November 16, 2010) that the election of Dolan and the overt snubbing of Kicanas signaled that the U.S. bishops "are going to continue their conservative tilt in both the church and American politics."

"This rightward tilt," Reese continued, "became evident six years ago when Cardinal Francis George of Chicago was elected vice president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops."

"Moderates," Reese observed, "were fooled into thinking that the bishops had returned to the center three years ago when they elected Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson as vice president at the same time that Cardinal George was elevated to the presidency. They expected Kicanas to be elected president this year, even though he had only defeated Archbishop Timothy Dolan, then of Milwaukee, by one vote."

There is little difference between the two bishops, Reese insisted, but then he pointed out that there *are* significant differences. "Kicanas," he wrote, "is a quiet conciliator who prefers to resolve conflict through dialogue and conversation. ... Dolan is more extroverted and willing to be aggressive and confrontational when he thinks it is necessary."

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Kicanas' mentor is the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago; Dolan's is the late Cardinal John O'Connor of New York. Both men were at loggerheads when they were alive. "That says it all," Reese wrote.

Bernardin would almost certainly not have been elected president of the conference had he been running today, nor would have Archbishops John Quinn of San Francisco, John Roach of St. Paul and Minneapolis, or Bishop James Malone of Youngstown.

"The bishops conference," Reese wrote, "has been radically changed by the bishops appointed by Pope John Paul II." The only amendment that I would make to Reese's statement is to add the words "and Pope Benedict XVI."

I would, however, agree with Reese's next sentence: "This is not going to change in the foreseeable future."

Nor will the situation in the Catholic church worldwide.

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