

Philly Sweepstakes

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 7, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

A source in Philadelphia tells me that the chancery is all abuzz that tomorrow will see the naming of a new archbishop to replace embattled Cardinal Justin Rigali. Rigali was himself named to the post on June 8, and three of his four auxiliaries had their appointments announced on June 8, so there is something of a tradition. But, if the buzz is right about the timing, there is little consensus about the choice. Here are the leading candidates with my handicapping:

Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput has a strong track record on child protection, which seems to be the most important qualification for the post given the fallout from the Grand Jury report in February and the just-beginning trial of two priests on charges of child molestation. This morning, those priests declined a plea deal. Chaput is a lightning rod on Church-State issues, but he has some media savvy to be sure. His appointment would be seen as a victory for the conservative wing in the American Church but even his critics, like myself, must admit that he is one of the brightest bishops on the bench today.

The other leading conservative candidate is Phoenix Bishop Thomas Olmsted. When Olmsted excommunicated Sr. Margaret McBride and removed the "Catholic" designation from St. Joseph's Hospital, he earned plenty of scorn in some circles but an equal measure of praise in other circles. His former vicar general, now the Bishop of Gallup, Bishop James Wall, is embroiled in controversy over charges in his local paper that he has failed to abide by the Dallas norms, but it is doubtful that those charges would stick to Olmsted. Biggest downside: Olmsted has virtually no media savvy whatsoever, and the new archbishop of the River City will need to spend a lot of time in front of the cameras in the weeks and months ahead.

Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta, in the face of widespread opposition both within and without the USCCB, brought the bishops together in 2002 while serving as President of the Conference, to enact the Dallas norms. Even those who criticized him at the time have come to recognize that had Gregory failed in establishing the Dallas Charter, the entire hierarchy would have seen its reputation crumble further. Still, Gregory is perceived as coming from the progressive camp among the bishops and that camp has not seen much in the way of promotions lately. Additionally, as the Archbishop of Atlanta, Gregory is building churches and in Philadelphia he would need to start closing them, raising the question "why would he want the job?"

Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport got high marks for his handling of sex abuse cases while serving as auxiliary bishop of Washington. In Bridgeport, however, his handling of a controversy surrounding Msgr. Michael Jude Fay created a lot of smoke. Fay was convicted of embezzling funds from his parish to pay for a lavish lifestyle for him and his boyfriend. Among the purchases? A condo in Philly. If Lori got the nomination, you can bet a photograph of the condo would be on the front page of the city's newspapers the next day, which would not be an auspicious start.

A compromise candidate could be Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville. Kurtz is highly regarded in the Conference, having won election as that body's vice-president just last November. He has been leading the ad hoc committee on defending marriage and the family, but has avoided some of the negative publicity that has attached itself to other prelates on that issue. He is well-liked in Louisville, where my friends tell me he is seen

as both strictly orthodox and very pastoral. Kurtz is originally from Allentown, PA, and attended St. Charles Borromeo seminary in Philadelphia. If Rome thinks they want someone with some sense of the ecclesiastical culture to clean up the situation, Kurtz could get the nod.

On the ground in Philadelphia, one of the names that has surfaced is Archbishop Timothy Broglio, currently the head of the military archdiocese. Broglio has great connections in Rome from his tenure as a top aide to then-Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano. But, with the revelations that Sodano was largely responsible for protecting serial abuser Father Marciel Maciel of the Legionaries, and plaintiffs seeking access to Vatican documents, the Sodano connection could kill Broglio's chances at advancement any time soon.

So, maybe we will have an announcement tomorrow, maybe not. Maybe one of the men listed above will get the nod, maybe a dark horse will leap frog over them. Stay tuned.

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