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Pope shuffles Vatican's deck with two key appointments

by John L. Allen Jr.



Archbishop Augustine Di Noia (CNS/Paul Haring)

With two key personnel decisions in late June and early July, Pope Benedict XVI effectively shuffled the Vatican's deck regarding a pair of its most contentious relationships, one with American nuns and the other with the church's traditionalist wing.

With the moves, Benedict also promoted one American while saying goodbye to another, leaving perceptions of a gathering "American moment" in key Vatican roles basically unaltered.

On June 26, the pope tapped Archbishop Augustine Di Noia, 69, a New York native, to the new position of vice president of the Vatican's Ecclesia Dei Commission. The appointment means that Di Noia is now the Vatican's lead official for relations with Catholic traditionalists, most notably the Society of St. Pius X, founded by the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre.

The Lefebvrist break with Rome in 1988 marks the only formal schism to follow the Second Vatican

Council (1962-65). Under Benedict, the Vatican has worked hard to bring the society back into the fold. Recently the Vatican announced the offer of a personal prelature, a sort of nonterritorial diocese, to reincorporate the traditionalists.



On July 2, Benedict filled an even bigger slot, naming Bishop

Gerhard Ludwig Müller of Regensburg, Germany, as the new prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Müller, 64, replaces American Cardinal William Levada, who turned 76 in mid-June.

Levada had served as the Vatican's top doctrinal official since 2006.

In keeping with Benedict's long-standing approach to filling the most sensitive slots, both jobs went to former aides and close friends.

Di Noia had served under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the doctrinal congregation, and Benedict later appointed him the Vatican's No. 2 official for liturgy. Müller, meanwhile, has been the bishop of the pope's home diocese in Germany since 2002. He's also the editor of Benedict's *Opera Omnia*, a comprehensive collection of the pope's theological writings, published by the Vatican editorial house.

The Müller appointment is likely to be far more consequential in the long run. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has traditionally been known in the Vatican as *la Suprema*, "the supreme" office, because of its far-reaching power. Among other things, Müller will inherit responsibility for the Vatican's relationship with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the main umbrella group in the United States for the leaders of women's religious orders.

One of Levada's last acts at the congregation was to release an eight-page doctrinal assessment of LCWR in April, faulting the group for "serious doctrinal problems" and "doctrinal confusion," including alleged "silence" on abortion and other pro-life concerns, a policy of "corporate dissent" on matters such as women priests and homosexuality, and the inroads of "certain radical feminist themes."

The congregation demanded an overhaul of the group's rules and procedures, appointing Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle to supervise that process.

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By all indications, Müller profiles as a theological conservative

likely to see eye to eye with many of the concerns outlined in the Vatican assessment. In a recent homily, for instance, Müller reflected on an upcoming national assembly of German Catholics set of Regensburg in 2014, basically declaring that an "anti-Roman sentiment" won't fly.

"People think they are critical and reform-oriented. In reality, these people are only superficial and want to conform to the spirit of the current times," Müller said in that April 29 homily.

"Being Catholic means being united with the bishop and the priests," Müller said. "Ravings against the truth of the faith and the unity of the church will not be tolerated."

On at least one front, however, Müller may be inclined to sympathy for the American sisters. LCWR has been criticized in some quarters for an overly horizontal spirituality that overemphasizes social justice concerns. The same complaint has been made over the years against a good friend of Müller's -- Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Dominican priest widely considered the father of liberation theology in Latin America.

Every year since 1998, Müller has traveled to Peru to take a course from Gutiérrez, and has spent time living with farmers in a rural parish near the border with Bolivia. In 2008, Müller accepted an honorary doctorate from the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, seen as a bastion of the progressive wing of the Peruvian church. On the occasion, he praised Gutiérrez and defended his theology.

Some observers also believe that as a German, Müller may feel less of a personal investment in the LCWR overhaul than Levada and other American prelates on the Roman scene.

Di Noia, meanwhile, faces the challenge of trying to complete negotiations for the Society of St. Pius X to return to the fold, and early indications are that some in the traditionalist world are a bit ambivalent -- both about Rome in general, and Di Noia specifically.



On the day his appointment was announced, Di Noia gave an

interview to Vatican Insider, an English-language website run by the Italian daily newspaper *La Stampa*, about the relationship with the traditionalists. Among other things, Di Noia said that both Vatican II and Pope John Paul II had advanced the church's understanding of Judaism, and the traditionalists will need time to adjust.

"This is a new concept which we know the traditionalists will not be able to accept immediately," Di Noia said. "Convincing them will take time, and in this respect we will have to be patient."

That line has been cited among some traditionalists as proof that Rome has broken with the eternal faith.

"Traditional Catholics are expected to effectively abandon the perennial truths of the Catholic Faith regarding the absolute necessity for non-Catholics -- Jews included -- to leave their religious affiliations and convert to Christ's one true Church," American traditionalist John Vennari wrote on July 3.

"This is neo-Modernism in action, something no Catholic is bound to accept," Vennari wrote. "In fact, our first duty is to resist."

As it happens, some traditionalists also have a beef with Müller. Rumors had tipped Müller for the better part of a year as the front-runner to take Levada's position, and roughly six months ago traditionalist groups in Germany and Italy circulated emails complaining that he upholds heterodox positions on several core issues.

Specifically, the emails cited Müller's views on the virginity of Mary (which he said in a 2003 book shouldn't be understood in a "physiological" sense), the Eucharist (Müller has apparently counseled against using the term "body and blood of Christ" to describe the consecrated bread and wine at Mass), and ecumenism (Müller has written that Protestants are "already part of the church" founded by Christ.)

Even before being tipped for the Vatican's top doctrinal job, Müller was not a traditionalist favorite. In 2009 he suggested that the four bishops ordained by Lefebvre in 1988 should step off the stage, proposing that they "lead an exemplary life as simple priests to repair a part of the damage the schism has caused."

Recently the head of the Society of St. Pius X has said that more time is needed to evaluate the prospect of a return, and it's possible that both the Müller and Di Noia appointments might further slow down their march to Rome.

With Levada's departure, the Vatican, at least temporarily, is without an American as a head of one of its congregations or pontifical councils, though American Cardinal Raymond Burke remains prefect of the Apostolic Signatura, the Vatican's Supreme Court.

Di Noia, however, is emblematic of a new wave of Americans playing key roles in other capacities.

In late June, former *TIME* and FOX News correspondent Greg Burke, a member of Opus Dei and a St. Louis native, was named to the new position of the Vatican's senior communications advisor. Carl Anderson, the supreme knight of the Knights of Columbus, leads the supervisory council of the Vatican Bank, recently prevailing in a showdown related to the ouster of the bank's high-profile president.

California-based attorney Jeffrey Lena, meanwhile, represents the Vatican in litigation in American courts, and for the last several months also has been a senior legal advisor to the Vatican on its efforts to satisfy international standards related to money-laundering.

In retirement, Levada is expected to divide his time between Rome and California. He's a native of Long Beach, and served as archbishop of San Francisco from 1995 until taking up his Vatican post in 2005.

Levada will remain a voting member of several Vatican departments, and will retain his right to participate in the election of the next pope, until he turns 80 in June 2016.

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