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New gung-ho archbishops known for aggressive style

by John L. Allen Jr.



Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone speaks during a July 27 press conference in San Francisco. (CNS/Dennis Callahan)

Analysis

Marine Capt. Lloyd W. Williams famously demurred when advised to pull back during a skirmish with numerically superior German forces in June 1918, at the peak of the First World War. His immortal reply, which became the motto of the Marines' Second Battalion, was: "Retreat? Hell, we just got here!"

If he were around today, the feisty Williams might well appreciate the way the Catholic church seems to be picking its bishops.

In the teeth of a perceived war on religion in America, the church is sending clear signals that it has no intention of backing down. Over the last six months, three of the country's most important dioceses have been entrusted to prelates known for aggressively defending church positions on hot-button issues such as

gay marriage and abortion, with the July 27 nomination of Salvatore Cordileone as the new archbishop of San Francisco as the latest example.



Cordileone joins fellow Archbishops William Lori of Baltimore,

appointed in March, and Samuel Aquila of Denver, named in May, as the most recent picks to head one of America's 33 archdioceses. A San Diego native, Cordileone will be installed Oct. 4.

An archbishop typically sets the tone for the church in his region, and all three of these new leaders have a reputation as anything but bashful.

As head of the U.S. bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Liberty, Lori has been the field general for the U.S. bishops in their struggle with the Obama administration over contraception mandates. While serving as the bishop of Fargo, N.D., Aquila penned a strong critique of the Obama administration's health care reform, and he was also outspokenly opposed to Obama receiving an honorary doctorate at the University of Notre Dame in 2009.

For his part, Cordileone is known as a proponent of California's Proposition 8, banning gay marriage. In an Aug. 4 opinion piece for the San Francisco Chronicle, Brian Cahill, a former executive director for Catholic Charities in the San Francisco archdiocese, described Cordileone as "the major Catholic cheerleader" for the initiative.

Though the appointments likely augur a strong voice for the bishops heading into the 2012 elections, their impact should have a much longer shelf life. Both Lori and Aquila are just 61, and Cordileone is even younger, at 56. Since bishops don't traditionally step down until 75, all three seem destined to play leadership roles for at least the next decade and a half.

As things stand, none of the newly minted archbishops seem poised to join the church's most exclusive club, the College of Cardinals, at least in their present posts. Neither Denver nor San Francisco is traditionally a "red hat" diocese, and many observers believe that day may have passed for Baltimore as well.

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Yet even without the prestige of being a cardinal, these prelates wield influence, including major roles within the national bishops' conference. While Lori heads the body on religious liberty, Cordileone chairs the Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage. Cordileone also has good Roman connections, having served from 1995 to 2002 as an official of the Apostolic Signatura, the Vatican's supreme court.

Cordileone probably also represents the most notable departure from the status quo.



Lori was already a national figure before his posting to Baltimore,

and he took over from Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, himself seen as a by-the-book conservative. (O'Brien was named a cardinal in 2011 in his new role as grand master of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher.) In Denver, Aquila replaced Archbishop Charles Chaput, now in Philadelphia, a longtime champion of the evangelical wing of the American church.

In San Francisco, however, Cordileone succeeds Archbishop George Niederauer, who in turn followed Archbishop William Levada, both now 76. (Levada became a cardinal after taking over the Vatican's doctrinal congregation in 2005). During their terms in San Francisco, Levada and Niederauer were both perceived as pragmatic moderates, albeit leaning more to the right than Archbishop John Quinn, a hero of the church's liberal camp during his run from 1977 to 1995.

Critics describe Cordileone as an ideological hard-liner, while fans style him as a confident evangelist unafraid to challenge the prevailing culture. Both sides agree, however, that he will likely represent a break from the more behind-the-scenes style of his immediate predecessors.

The new crop of archbishops may betoken a more traditional ethos across the board. In Fargo, for instance, Aquila once banned dances as well as a "pajama day" at a Catholic middle school, expressing concern about children being sexualized. In 2005, Fargo also became one of two U.S. dioceses to require all couples undergoing marriage preparation to receive instruction in natural family planning. Cordileone, meanwhile, is a devotee of the traditional Latin Mass, presiding over celebrations of the older Mass on several occasions.

At the same time, Cordileone also has a record of commitment to elements of the church's social teaching typically seen as more progressive, such as opposition to the death penalty and promotion of immigration reform. Fluent in Spanish, Cordileone served for four years as a pastor in Calexico, Calif., on the U.S.-Mexico border, during the early 1990s.

Cordileone was among the earliest supporters of Proposition 34, a measure on the November ballot in California that would ban capital punishment and replace it with life without parole.

In terms of church politics, most observers see Cordileone's appointment as a sign of a growing role for American Cardinal Raymond Burke, president of the Apostolic Signatura. Burke, currently the lone American heading a major Vatican office, sits on the Vatican's powerful Congregation for Bishops.

The tendency to credit Burke is augmented by the fact that the papal ambassador to the United States, Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, privately has expressed concern about "politicization" of the American church heading into the 2012 elections, suggesting a preference for a more diplomatic style of leadership. Some observers wonder if Viganò's involvement in the ongoing Vatican leaks scandal, centering on revelations of private correspondence he wrote to the pope charging corruption in Vatican finances, have diminished his influence in the nomination process.

Further opportunities to shape the direction of the American church are on the horizon, with three other archdioceses due for a new bishop soon. Indianapolis is presently vacant, while in Portland, Ore., Archbishop John Vlazny is already over 75, and in Hartford, Conn., Archbishop Henry Mansell turns 75 in October.

Even more importantly, Cardinal Francis George in Chicago is already over 75. Although most observers do not expect a successor to be named imminently, it's the next diocese traditionally led by a cardinal likely to see a change at the top.

Yet no matter what happens in those locales, the reins of the U.S. church now seem firmly in the hands of leaders committed to a "no retreat, no surrender" stance.

For the record, Capt. Williams actually died in combat after refusing to pull back, though, of course, the United States and its allies went on to win the war. How well today's new crop of gung-ho archbishops may fare in their battles should shape much of the country's Catholic drama for some time to come.

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