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Is an American cardinal who spent years elsewhere still an American?

Maureen Fiedler | Nov. 29, 2012 NCR Today

I noted in the news from Rome recently that an 11th American eligible to be a papal elector (i.e., less than 80 years of age) was added to the College of Cardinals. His name is James Michael Harvey, who was elevated to cardinal by Pope Benedict XVI on Nov. 24.

For the first time, all those made cardinals in that consistory came from outside Europe. Specifically, they came from Lebanon, India, Nigeria, Colombia and the Philippines, as well as the United States. And Pope Benedict XVI took the occasion to emphasize that he wanted the College of Cardinals to "express the universality of Catholicism."

I had never heard of James Michael Harvey before. "In what diocese does he serve?" I wondered. Turns out, he doesn't work in the United States at all, and though he was born here (in the Milwaukee archdiocese), his years of ministry have largely been spent elsewhere.

He has been part of the diplomatic service of the Vatican, serving in the Dominican Republic then in Rome at the Vatican Secretariat of State. Since 1998, he has served as Prefect of the Papal Household. His language skills are considerable. Besides his native English, he speaks Italian, German, French and Spanish.

But what does he know firsthand about American Catholics? About the church in the United States? His career has been spent largely in Vatican City, where he has no doubt absorbed the mores of that subculture. If he enters a conclave as an elector of the next pope, will he enter as an American or a Vaticanista? Will he be looking for a leader who can deal with the diverse issues that concern American Catholics or a leader who wants to preserve Vatican culture?

Of course, I don't know John Michael Harvey. Maybe he has a breadth of vision that would make him an asset in any meeting or conclave. But his consecration raises the question of "insiders" vs. "outsiders" in the conclave and the need for electors to indeed represent -- in their thinking as well as their ethnicity -- the universality of the church.

Of course, this whole hierarchical system is outmoded. The church needs a totally different system for choosing everyone, from pastors to bishops to the pope. And there are available systems -- democratic systems -- we could study in Protestant denominations. But until we do such a study and a miracle happens, papal electors need a worldwide vision, a vision "outside the walls" of the Vatican itself, for the good of the whole church.

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