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Wuerl: 'Teach truth from pulpit, then meet people where they are'

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NCR Today

Conclave 2013

Rome — Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., may not have the rock star charisma of New York's Timothy Dolan or the reputation for simplicity of Boston's Sean O'Malley, but he's arguably the most pivotal senior prelate in the United States for two reasons.

First, he's seen by many observers as the dead center of the bishops' conference, a pragmatic thinker able to hold people of differing outlooks and temperaments together. Second, he's viewed as an effective manager who can get things done. Put those two qualities together, and it's no mystery why he's become the "go-to" figure among the U.S. bishops on a variety of fronts.

Wuerl is also no stranger to the Vatican, having lived and worked here as priest-secretary to Cardinal John Wright of Pittsburgh from 1969 to 1979, the period when Wright served as prefect of the Congregation for Clergy.

Wuerl clearly enjoys the esteem of Pope Benedict XVI. The apple of Benedict's eye is the idea of a new evangelization, meaning relighting the missionary fires of the church, especially in the secular cultures of the West. When the Vatican staged a Synod of Bishops on the subject in the fall, Benedict tapped the 72-year-old Wuerl for the all-important role of *relator*, or general secretary, whose role is crucial in keeping the synod on track and shaping its conclusions.

Wuerl sat down Tuesday morning for an interview with *NCR*'s John Allen, Dennis Coday and Joshua McElwee at Rome's North American College.

Highlights from the interview include:

- Wuerl said he believes the next pope has to be a missionary-in-chief, who may use social media more and travel less in order to be present to people around the world.
- He said engaging secularism will be the major issue in the conclave -- finding a pope who can reintroduce the experience of a relationship with God to people who are so absorbed in secular culture that their horizon doesn't reach that high.?
- He said he thinks the church and the Vatican need to learn to speak to people directly, bypassing media filters and frames.
- Wuerl said the current media atmosphere, focused on scandals and breakdowns, may translate into a desire among the cardinals for better management in the Vatican, but predicted that will not be a dominant? concern in the conclave.
- Faced with Catholics who love the church but who hold dissenting views, Wuerl said, ?In the pulpit, we're supposed to present the teaching with all of its unvarnished clarity, but when you step out of the pulpit, you have to meet people where they are and try to walk with them.?
- He said he hopes for an early conclave, perhaps after just ?five or six? meetings of the cardinals in their General Congregations.

The full text of the interview appears below.

Now that you've sat with Benedict's decision to resign for a while, what do you think his legacy will be?

I've given a lot of thought to this over recent days. I'd like to touch on three elements that are all a part of that legacy.

On the level of people who would look to this papacy from an academic and intellectual perspective, I think the great legacy is going to be that he really did try to re-engage the compatibility of faith and reason. I think for academics, for people who look beyond the immediate, that's going to be one of the enduring things.

On a purely pastoral level, I think the new evangelization is going to be his legacy. His predecessor really began to focus on the need for it, but it was Pope Benedict who gave it the clarity and who institutionalized it by setting up a Pontifical Council. He spoke about it at almost every opportunity. Leading up to the Synod [of Bishops] on the new evangelization, I made it a point to look at the talks he gave, his *ad limina* talks, and in others. In some way, shape or form, he found a way to say something about the new evangelization. I think that's probably going to be his pastoral legacy because that's the pastoral need. The idea is to re-engage this generation with the faith of the church.

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The third aspect [of his legacy] is an insight he's had and that he's leaving to his successor, and it comes under the heading of ministerial operations. His focus on how he communicates is part of his legacy. No pope going into the future is going to be able to understand the role of the papacy in the same way.

One part of that concerns the ministry of presence, which has been a dominant factor [of the papacy] ever since John Paul II. Benedict did it very, very well. I may be speaking out of a certain prejudice, but he came to Washington and captivated everybody. People still talk about that Mass at Nationals Park as if it

had happened just a week ago. But I believe that "presence" is going to have to be interpreted differently in the future, because it doesn't have to be physical presence anymore. Now with electronic media, with all the capabilities of reaching people around the world, the next pontificate is going to have to rethink how to be present in an effective way. How can the ministry of Peter be visible and effective without having to get on a plane and fly somewhere, consuming an enormous amount of energy going through the crowds?

The second element, and perhaps the more significant, is that we're only learning now how to speak to people directly, and not in a mediated way. I think that's going to be the challenge of the church moving into the future. That was a big part of the life of the church for centuries -- we spoke directly to people. We spoke from pulpits; priests spoke to their flock. As late as when I was in college and we were looking at *Mystici Corporis* and *Mediator Dei*, encyclicals of Pius XII, it wasn't something we heard about on the radio or the television or read about in newspapers. We were getting it directly.

Your point is that you didn't bring a frame to those documents from the media?

Exactly. I think that's going to be the challenge, because right now almost everything that is done by the church is seen through someone's prism. People hear about it through somebody else's perspective and frame of reference. For instance, when John Paul made his visit to the United States in 1987, the storyline was that he would be contested everywhere he went. I remember being at one of the events, and I didn't see any contestation. There weren't people outside with banners. Yet that evening on the news, they had found three people who were protesting, and the camera looked at the pope's visit through these three people. I thought, this is a storyline, not the fact. This is a prism, not reality.

I think that's where the Holy See is learning, as all of us are. In the archdiocese of Washington, we have completely revamped our way of communicating. We had some really expert communications come in, pro bono, and tell us what we were doing wrong, which was just about everything, and what we needed to do. One of the things they said to us is that you have to reach people directly. As I said earlier, that was how we spoke to people for centuries. Now we're in a new age in which people are used to having the story framed for them for newspapers, television and radio. We're passing through that to the social media, where people are speaking directly. The Holy See has to get to a point where it's able to get its message out directly.

What do you think will be the most important issues for the cardinals as you pick a pope?

I think the first, overriding one, and it follows in the wake of the Synod on the new evangelization, is the realization that the secularism of this age has so engulfed our culture and our people that whoever is pope is going to have to devote enormous energy, with all kinds of new ways, especially in the media, to refocus on the possibility of transcendence as a part of human experience. It's reintroducing the experience of a relationship with God to people who are so absorbed in this secular culture that their horizon doesn't reach that high.

I don't want this to sound trite, but I really think it's at the heart of the ministry: The pope is going to have to refocus on the spiritual mission of the church. That's reintroducing people to the Word of God.

In other words, you're looking for a "missionary-in-chief"?

I think that's a good way of putting it. One of the things that came out of the synod for the new evangelization, and it was spoken about often, was that the church today seems much more parallel to the early church, the church of the first disciples, than the church of 50 years ago. The early disciples had to bring the experience of the risen Lord to a world that simply didn't know what they were talking about.

Little by little, that experience began to capture peoples' hearts, mainly where the Christians lived. I think that's where we are now.

Is focusing so much on secularism a peculiarly Western perspective that doesn't necessarily speak to other parts of the world?

I went into the synod on the new evangelization thinking that. In fact, I had even written about this 'Western' culture. Bishop after bishop and cardinal after cardinal got up in the synod and said, 'We're experiencing that as well.' It came from Africa, Asia, Oceania ... I had to go back and rethink where I was. After the opening talks on the situations on the different continents and we had the break, I realized it was far more endemic. One by one, bishops got up in the synod and said that.

Engaging secularism is going to be the major challenge. I think that is going to mean a return to a very basic kerygma. We sometimes get so caught up in one or another aspect of the teaching, we forget that if a person hasn't been introduced to Christ, if a person hasn't embraced the risen Lord and the church that's an expression of that experience, what we're saying just sounds like a bunch of rules or negative statements limiting their personal freedom. We have to get back to that core kerygma.

Is the implication that we need a greater capacity to talk about what we're for rather than what we're against?

That will naturally follow, and it came up in the synod. A number of people said to us, you know you can smile when you're teaching the Word. One woman gave a very wonderful speech, and right in the middle of it, she looked around and said, 'You do know that priests can smile . and that goes for bishops, too!' We have the most wonderful news, that there's a whole better way to make our way through life, that Christ is truly risen and is with us. We shouldn't announce it as if it's some burden you have to bear. We have to find a way to highlight that this is a positive message.

Of course, there are obligations that come with it. I think we all know people who say, 'If I accepted that, I'd have to change my life.' The pope said in his encyclical on hope and in his words at the closing of the Mass in Washington that people who have hope live differently. One person has said to me, 'I'm tempted [to accept the church's message] because it's so inviting, but I'd have to change my life.' Yes, that's true, but you can accept the message and then work at changing your life.

What does that lead you to in terms of the qualities you're looking for in a new pope?

One of the qualities has to be openness to engaging the modern culture in a very modern way, with modern means of communication, with a reassessment of what 'presence' means. Benedict was already beginning to do that, but he just said his energy ran out.

Another quality, and this would be true of everybody we're looking at, is that the pope has to be seen as truly a man of God, a spiritual person. I think that was true of Pope Benedict, he sort of exuded this sense of relationship with God. The fact that he could smile so easily in all kinds of difficult moments said to me, This man is at peace. I would hope that the next pope would bring sense of urgency, but also serenity.

What about internal governance and reform of the Vatican bureaucracy?

The Holy See and the work of the church in general are usually depicted according to a storyline, but I'm not certain that's the reality. In the archdiocese of Washington, we just opened a new seminary because of growth in vocations. I just left the rite of election, and we have 1,200 people coming in to the Easter sacraments. I visit parishes, and the faith life in the parishes and the lay leadership is amazing. We're

doing an archdiocesan synod, and we had a meeting with a couple hundred laity. I said to them, you've been invited, but you don't have to do this because it's very taxing. We outlined what they have to do, and every one of them said, "I want to be a part of that."

Granted, there's vitality in the church that doesn't register in media coverage. One reason why it's difficult to tell that story, however, is because of distractions here: the Holocaust-denying bishop controversy, Vatileaks and so on. Will a reform of the Vatican to prevent such breakdowns factor into your deliberations?

I don't know how big a part that consideration will be. These administrative functions are important, and some sort of supervision is important. Remember, I worked here in the days of Archbishop [Giovanni] Benelli ...

When the trains ran on time.

There you go! [Editor's note: Benelli was the "substitute," or chief of staff, under Pope Paul VI.] I guess there is a longing for the type of supervision we had then. In dioceses in the United States, when we bishops stand around the coffee urn, so often our time and our conversation and energy is directed to good administration, because if you lose control over that, it's not good. I've often said that the only scriptural quote taken at face value and lived in its entirety in the Catholic church is, "The right hand should not know what the left hand is doing."

What we're seeing in so much of the media coverage will probably translate into a desire for closer scrutiny. But I don't think that's going to be dominant in the conclave because I think the bigger picture will be much more important.

The media, especially the Italian media, has given considerable play to reports about supposed "gay lobbies" in the Vatican, along the resignation of Cardinal Keith O'Brien in Scotland and the continuing controversy about Cardinal Roger Mahony's participation in the conclave. Can the cardinals just tune all that out, or is there something in it that will shape your thinking?

Just to put things into perspective, the morning news on Italian TV today began with, "Poor Italy ... we don't have a pope, and we don't have a government." There's always something not working the way everybody would like it to work. You have to constantly work at putting all this into perspective. We're a church, a universal church, but we're an incarnational church. The great divine gift of God's grace is mediated through human beings. As long as this church is incarnational, there are going to be problems. I think the strength of the Catholic church is that when it does finally identify a problem, it works to resolve it. The sexual abuse of minors is an example in the United States.

You're saying that the press climate won't have any impact on the conclave?

I wouldn't be driven to assume that whatever's the lead story today is going to impact it that greatly, because it'll be something different tomorrow. One of the reasons why you don't have access to media while you're in the conclave is that we're supposed to be focused on that silence that allows the Spirit to talk to our hearts, and I think that Spirit is going to be talking in long-range terms. That means getting the church once again focused, in the minds and hearts of our people, on the spiritual mission.

When you talk about engaging secularism, what about listening to that society? There are people very engaged with the church and very in love with the church who feel a disconnect on matters like sexuality morality. In this last election cycle, same-sex marriage laws were passed in five states with the help of Catholics, who feel very attached to the church and want to be part of it. There are Swiss abbots calling for a re-examination of how to engage divorced and remarried Catholics. Some of these people say nobody is listening to them. How do you respond to that?

One of the challenges of secularism is that it's not something outside us. In too many instances, secularism has so permeated the church that sometimes it's the frame of reference even for very good people, people who have a strong allegiance to the church. They don't always hear more than their particular source of information, their particular reading material, the voices of their friends.

How do you engage them?

That's where we come to unmediated communications. As long as everything I say is filtered through somebody else, it's going to be very hard, especially if you're dealing with people who are committed but who are being told that your commitment has to be expressed in resisting this or dissenting from that. It's very hard to have a conversation in that frame of reference. That's why unmediated communication is going to be very, very important.

When somebody tells me how many people voted for same-sex legislation, that just tells me I didn't do a very good job explaining to people what marriage is all about. We also have to remember that so much of this is how it's presented to people. Many young people tell me they support it because it's a matter of civil rights. Nobody ever asked them what we're talking about in terms of a natural human relationship between a man and a woman. What word do you use to describe what happens when a man and a woman come together and say, "Let's form a permanent union and let's have kids?" Historically, it's always been "marriage." I think the confusion is far, far wider than whether you follow the teachings of the Catholic church.

Your instinct is to engage Catholics with contrasting views in conversation rather than telling them to get out?

You have to. Our job is to bring people to Christ, to hold them as close to the church as we can. That means working with people who are making their way, hopefully in the same direction. That's a great challenge today, but it's always been the challenge. We have to work with people. In the pulpit we're supposed to present the teaching with all of its unvarnished clarity, but when you step out of the pulpit you have to meet people where they are and try to walk with them.

Not unfairly, sometimes people see others trying to express their faith appearing to be cast out [of the church], such as Sr. Elizabeth Johnson and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. When you talk about showing people what it means to be Christian, how do you reconcile those things?

I think you have to look at the life of the church. Look at all the things the church is doing. In the archdiocese of Washington, look at the effort to sustain schools for the inner-city kids who have no other option for an education and a life. Look at the efforts of Catholic Charities to touch 120,000 people a year. Look at all the parish work that's going on to help people make their way through life as close to Christ as they can be. I don't hear about that a lot, but I see it as the living out of the faith.

When we come to any theologian's views, they always have to be weighed against the received teaching

of the church. My job as a bishop is to say, "This is the received teaching." I don't think it's casting anybody out to say, "What you said doesn't comport with this." That's speaking the truth in love, and I think we have to do that.

How do you respond to the controversy about Mahony's participation in the conclave?

I saw the statement that he issued. The relationship of a cardinal to the Holy See is something that's direct and immediate between the Holy Father and the cardinal. As a result, I don't have any comment to make at all. I saw what the cardinal said, and I think he was trying to put the reaction to his ministry in the context of what was going on decades ago, but I don't have any comment to make on that.

Finally, one of the first orders of business for the cardinals is to fix the date of the conclave. Some want to move it up, others feel that maybe you need the time to deliberate. What's your feeling?

That's an excellent question, because it gets to the issue of, Do we know each other? Do the cardinals know each other? I think the Holy Father, with his *motu proprio*, has made it possible [to move it up]. Going into this conclave, we cardinals have had several occasions to meet as a body, prior to consistories when the pope would call us all together. During the synod, there were a huge number of cardinals from around the world present. One of the reasons why we have a half-hour coffee break in the middle of the morning session [of the synod], at least in my opinion, is for the bishops to get to know each other. In all the synods I've been a part of, I always found that one of the enduring things about it, that you got to know bishops from all over the world.

I don't think we're going into this conclave ignorant of each other. I think we probably know one another, at least to some extent, fairly well. Thanks to the media, we're almost immediately aware of something going on in somebody else's diocese, if it's negative. Then you have to say to yourself, "I bet he's also doing some good things." I think when we gather for the General Congregations, I don't think we're going to need a long time.

You're in favor of an early date?

I would much prefer that we get started in five or six days after we start these General Congregations.

You think it's possible to begin as early as March 6 or 7?

I would hope, but then again my hopes are one out of 115.

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