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Harrisburg opening sets scene as papal indicator

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today

The death May 2 of Bishop Joseph McFadden, who headed the Harrisburg Diocese since August 2010, hands Pope Francis a unique opportunity to choose a U.S. bishop of his personal liking.

Church observers will watch carefully what happens in the Pennsylvania diocese in the coming months. It will send signals throughout the church.

Unlike the three episcopal appointments Francis has already made for U.S. dioceses, -- appointments of men already in the Vatican hopper before his election-- the opening in Harrisburg provides a chance for the pope to oversee the entire episcopal appointment process.

McFadden, 65, died unexpectedly May 2 while attending a meeting of Catholic bishops in Pennsylvania. The cause of the death has not yet been announced.

Just this week Francis appointed Jesuit Father Michael Barber to be the next bishop of the diocese of Oakland. Barber, 59, currently director of spiritual formation at St. John's Seminary in the archdiocese of Boston, succeeds Oakland Bishop Salvatore Cordileone, who became the archbishop of San Francisco last October.

Barber's path to Oakland came through academia as well as service as a military chaplain. He was ordained as a priest in San Francisco in 1985 and then continued his studies in Rome and at Oxford University. In 1991, he became a commissioned officer in the U.S. Naval Reserve.

Francis' two other U.S. episcopal appointments, made last month, were viewed as having a distinctly conservative bent. They were Bishop Michael Jackels of Wichita as the archbishop of Dubuque, Iowa and Monsignor John Folda, rector of St. Gregory the Great Seminary in Lincoln, Nebraska, as the Bishop of

Fargo, North Dakota.

Those appointments elated conservatives while disappointing others who had hoped the new pontiff would set a more pastoral path.

Yet most church observers generally agree the appointments of Barber, Jackels and Folda do not say much about the new pope's personal proclivity as episcopal choices might go.

The process of choosing a bishop takes months, even, at times, years. The first three papal appointments were the result of processes in place long before Francis' election. The same cannot be said about the Harrisburg situation.

While Francis' early utterances have been overwhelmingly pastoral in nature how he will move the institution forward operationally begs to be answered.

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Popes, of course, have enormous influence in setting direction for the church. One of their most powerful tools is in the appointment of bishops.

During the pontificates of John XXIII and Paul VI appointments came from across the theologian spectrum, but were generally viewed as pastoral in nature.

During the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI appointments favored clergy with narrow orthodox credentials. It has been widely reported that John Paul and Benedict required of episcopal candidates litmus tests, including a stated opposition to women's ordination and stated support for priestly celibacy and the 1968 papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, which reaffirmed the church's opposition to artificial birth control.

This papal concern for institutional orthodoxy excluded many candidates known for their pastoral experiences and inclinations.

The search for McFadden's successor will give the new pope his first opportunity to select a bishop from start to finish.

Fox is NCR publisher and can be followed on Twitter at NCRTomFox

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