

The American insider in Francis' lineup

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 26, 2013

Analysis

A change in administration always triggers a game of musical chairs, and it's well underway in the Vatican right now. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Pope Benedict XVI's secretary of state, is on his way out, while Archbishop Georg Gänswein, though still running the papal household, is no longer the pope's go-to guy.

One figure navigating the transition to Francis quite nicely, however, was a key American insider under Benedict, too: Msgr. Peter Wells, who holds the critical job of assessor in the Secretariat of State.

Every new pope has to assemble his own team, and Wells already has been penciled in to Pope Francis' starting lineup -- as a matter of fact, right in the heart of the batting order.

To be clear, Wells is not the only American with juice, and not the highest-ranking cleric. That's Boston's Sean O'Malley, by far the U.S. cardinal who knows Latin America best, and the only one to have stayed with Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Argentina before he became pope.

There's also an expectation that an American prelate soon will be named to head a Vatican department, filling the void left after Cardinal William Levada stepped down at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith last July. (One tip has Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., going to the Congregation for the Clergy, but word to the wise: In the Francis era, personnel rumors have the approximate value of buggy whip stock.)

Yet whatever happens, no American is likely to be as critical to day-to-day Vatican operations as Wells.

Born and raised in Tulsa, Okla., Wells got his initial Roman seasoning as a seminarian at the North American College, earning degrees from the Jesuit-run Gregorian University and the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family at the Lateran University. He later got a doctorate in canon law from the Gregorian, while also studying at the Academia, the Vatican's elite school for diplomats.

After a brief stint in the Vatican embassy in Nigeria, Wells returned to Rome in 2002 to work in the first section of the Secretariat of State, the department that deals with general church affairs -- meaning, pretty much, whatever's bubbling at the moment.

Wells was tapped to head the English desk in 2006 and then named assessor in 2009, making him the top deputy to the *sostituto*, or Vatican chief of staff. (For "West Wing" fans, that makes Wells the Josh Lyman character.)

This alone would qualify Wells as a major player, but his résumé only scratches the surface. In effect, he's become the interpreter and point of contact between the Vatican and the entire English-speaking world. He's the first port of call for Anglophone churchmen, diplomats, activists, and other movers and shakers who need entrée, who have a project to promote or a bone to pick, or who'd simply like to know what's going on.

To take a banal example, when a Chicago lawyer wanted to donate the Internet domain name "popefrancis.com"

to the new pontiff, he contacted Cardinal Francis George, who in turn called Wells. (As a footnote, the lawyer bought the domain in 2010, well before there actually was a Pope Francis. His next prediction is that the Cubs will win the World Series in 2015; odds-makers can debate which of those two developments is more improbable.)

More substantively, secret cables revealed as part of the Wikileaks scandal show how much diplomats rely on Wells for readings of the Vatican's take on sensitive issues, such as the church's sexual abuse scandals. Other players know the score, too. In 2010, when parishioners in Boston wanted to appeal the closing of nine local parishes, they consulted a couple of canon lawyers about the best way to get the pope's attention, and the reply was to address the petition to Wells.

Over the years I've had more exchanges than I can count with American bishops who express interest or concern over something going on in Rome, and who wind up the conversation by saying, "I'll have to talk to Wells."

Wells generally shuns the spotlight, partly because of his job and partly because of personality. Behind the scenes, however, he's almost Zelig-like in his ubiquity.

For instance, when President Barack Obama met Benedict in the Vatican in 2009, Wells served as the interpreter, and the video feed showed him catching up to the president in the hallway afterward to ensure that a particular point had been clearly understood.

It's been said that if Wells were 10 years older, he'd be a strong contender to be the Vatican's first American secretary of state, with pretty much everything you'd want ? smarts, a strong work ethic, a good sense of humor, and a reputation for playing things straight. Insiders also say that Wells has penetrated the Italian cultural scene without being assimilated to it, retaining a healthy Anglo-Saxon impatience with double talk and inefficiency.

Whatever the reasons, Wells is clearly poised to be a player under the new regime.

When Francis created a five-member commission June 26 to investigate the troubled Vatican bank, formally known as the Institute for the Works of Religion, Wells was tapped as part of the group. Three of the others are bishops or cardinals, while the remaining member is American laywoman Mary Ann Glendon -- meaning that in all probability, Wells will be the prime mover in terms of actually doing the work.

The commission reports directly to Francis, and has been given special authority to collect documents and testimony without being hamstrung by internal Vatican rules that protect confidentiality.

In early August, Francis issued another legal document intended to beef up the Vatican's commitment to fighting money-laundering and other financial shenanigans, creating a new Financial Security Committee to oversee the transparency efforts of all agencies of both the Holy See and the Vatican City State.

The committee is composed of seven officials, with Wells in charge. (Technically the document says it's the assessor who heads the committee, whoever that may be, but obviously Francis knows it's Wells right now.)

By dint of circumstance, including the recent arrest of a Vatican accountant on charges of trying to smuggle \$26 million into Italy and civil investigations of the recently resigned leadership of the Vatican bank, financial transparency has become the acid test of whatever reform Francis is going to deliver. The fact that Francis has effectively set up Wells to be the architect of his financial glasnost thus speaks volumes.

This American heavy-hitter, in other words, doesn't look like he's headed for the bench anytime soon.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org. Follow him on

Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr.]

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