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Nominees announced for USCCB leadership roles

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic
Fall bishops' meeting 2013

The USCCB has announced the 10 candidates for presidency and vice presidency of the conference. The president is elected from these 10 nominees, and the vice president is elected from the remaining nine. Here are the candidates:

- Archbishop Gregory Aymond of New Orleans
- Archbishop Charles Chaput, OFM Cap., of Philadelphia
- Bishop Blase Cupich of Spokane, Wash.
- Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston
- Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles
- Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky.
- Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore
- Archbishop Dennis Schnurr of Cincinnati
- Archbishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit
- Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami

It is an interesting list. The most obvious thing about it is the name that is not there: Cardinal Sean O'Malley, OFM Cap, who has become Pope Francis' "go-to" guy in the U.S. The work of the Council of Cardinals advising Pope Francis is time consuming and, in the event, more vital than anything that will be happening at the USCCB for the next three years, so O'Malley was smart to decline nomination.

Smart money says Kurtz is more or less a lock for the presidency. He is currently the VP at the USCCB, and he does not belong to any ideological camp. His early years doing social justice ministry as a priest in Allentown, Pa., shaped his understanding of the church in ways that would be *simpatico* with the vision of

Pope Francis. And perhaps most importantly, he is well liked by his brother bishops. That means the real contest will be for the vice presidency.

It is interesting to see both Chaput and Lori on the list. They both represent the same "culture warrior" wing of the conference. I cannot imagine that the USCCB will select Chaput after his comments about Pope Francis, reprinting emails he got from people who feel "betrayed" by Pope Francis. And I suspect enough bishops feel that the religious liberty train has gone far enough down the tracks that they will not award the VP post to Lori. Vigneron, less of a culture warrior but decidedly in the conservative camp, led the ad hoc committee to draft a letter on poverty that failed on a floor vote last year, one of the conference's most embarrassing moments in recent years. When you have the Gospels as primary source material, it is appalling that the ad hoc committee could not draft a statement on poverty capable of earning the support of the full body of bishops. As well, all three of these men suffer from being East Coast bishops, and the Church's leadership needs to reflect the growing churches of the South and West.

Wenski of Miami would be a forceful leader, and his credentials on issues related to poverty and immigration are second to none. I would hate to see him leave the Domestic Policy Committee, which he is slated to chair starting in November. Aymond is a very fine man, but he has not been much of a vote-getter at previous elections. Cupich is the only non-Metropolitan nominated, and his recent article at *America* demonstrates not only a keen mind but an enthusiastic supporter of Pope Francis. DiNardo, I confess, has always been something of an enigma to me.

I suspect that the real choice will come down to Schnurr and Gomez, both of whom are centrist bishops, well respected by virtually all of their colleagues. Schnurr, who was general secretary at the USCCB during its best years, could help fix some of the managerial issues plaguing the conference. Gomez is the most prominent Catholic Latino in the country, and putting him into a prominent leadership post would help reflect the Church of the future.

The conference is at a real crossroads, in the quirky way that bishops' conferences get to crossroads. It is all very polite. But behind the veil of pleasantries, there are real differences, and the USCCB needs to decide if it is going to get on the Pope Francis bandwagon or pursue the kind of culture warrior approach that has too often hijacked the bishops' stance in the public square these past few years. This vote will be the first indicator of what direction they will pursue.

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