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Kurtz's encounters on the margins

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

Fall bishops' meeting 2013

I read with interest my colleague Michael Sean Winters' blog on the meaning of the elections that occurred this morning at the meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Of Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., the conference president-elect, he wrote:

“Kurtz is not seen as belonging to any party or faction, and so ideally suited to lead a conference which has been dominated in recent years by conservatives, and is now grappling with Pope Francis' call to focus on issues that have a more leftward tilt, at least as they intersect with U.S. politics. Kurtz is a great guy and almost everyone likes him. Fr. Anthony Chandler, a priest of the Archdiocese of Louisville, and an old chum of mine, told me, “Archbishop Kurtz is a very genuine person. He works hard to give people the opportunity to share their views. He will work very hard. He keeps an amazing schedule in the archdiocese and gets to meet lots of people.”

The term “genuine” applied to the archbishop would seem consistent with his reputation from his days as a priest in the Diocese of Allentown, Pa. Full disclosure, I knew him for a few years back in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Fuller disclosure: my wife, Sally, worked for him when he was head of the diocese's social justice office. She worked on a staff that helped him open the diocese's first soup kitchen and on other programs for the poor and disenfranchised.

I also helped him and others in his office during that period to develop a series of talks on the church, militarism and the nuclear threat as that issue was reaching a rather heated moment in the culture. The

talks were given as a program in parishes throughout the archdiocese.

Kurtz not only helped the church at large move to the margins in those early years of his priesthood. In his personal life, he took care of his older brother, George, who was born with Down syndrome and lived with Kurtz in rectories in Pennsylvania and in the bishop's residence. Here's a link to a wonderful reflection, "The Joy of Georgie," first printed in 1990 in Catholic Digest.

Georgie died in 2002.

I've not had much contact with Archbishop Kurtz in recent years. But from what I've heard and read about his tenure as bishop and later archbishop, the term "genuine" still applies. So do "decent" and "pastoral."

What a challenging and exciting time to be a leader in a church that has seen more than its share of turmoil and division and appears in transition to a new way of being present in the world. I wish Archbishop Kurtz the best in this new role.

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