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Francis uses red hats to offer lesson on global church

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

Popes bestow red hats, the symbol of the cardinal's office, for a variety of reasons. In some cases it's to signal the importance of a particular office, or to reward loyal performance over a lifetime, or to confirm the importance of a particular diocese.

For his first crop of new cardinals, Pope Francis also seems to be using red hats to teach. In effect, the first pontiff from the developing world is offering a lesson in the realities of life in a global church.

The obvious take-away from the 19 new cardinals announced by Francis on Jan. 12 is that ten come from outside Europe, with only four Vatican officials (three Italians and one German), just two other new residential European cardinals, and only one from North America.

There will be no new cardinals from the United States in Francis' first consistory, the event in which new cardinals are created. (The two obvious places where new cardinals might have been named in the U.S., Los Angeles and Philadelphia, both still have retired cardinals under the age of 80, and popes traditionally have been reluctant to name two cardinal-electors in the same diocese.)

By way of contrast, there are four Latin Americans among the cardinal-electors, one from the Caribbean (Haiti), two Africans, and two Asians. There's also another new red hat for the Caribbean among the over-80 "honorary" cardinals in Archbishop Kevin Edward Felix of Castries, St. Lucia.

Notably, there are two new cardinals for the two of the three largest Catholic countries on earth by population, with Orani João Tempesta, O.Cist., Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, and Orlando B. Quevedo, O.M.I., Archbishop of Cotabato in the Philippines.

Catholics in both nations had long complained they were under-represented in the College of Cardinals

relative to their Catholic populations. (The other nation in the top three in terms of Catholic population is Mexico.)

The new geographic spread among the cardinals is a reflection of the broad north/south shift in the Catholic population that's been underway for decades, and that was symbolized in March by the election of a pope from "the ends of the earth" as Francis put it in introducing himself on the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square.

Of the 1.2 billion Catholics in the world today, fully two-thirds live in the southern hemisphere, a share that's expected to reach three-quarters by mid-century.

With just under 70 million Catholics, the United States accounts for around six percent of the global Catholic total, meaning that it's long been over-represented in the College of Cardinals relative to population.

With 11 cardinals under 80 and thus eligible to vote for the next pope, the United States has roughly ten percent of the world's cardinal-electors. Both in 2005 and 2013, cardinals from the United States cast more ballots to elect the next pope than Brazil and the Philippines combined, despite the fact that those two nations together represent roughly four times the Catholic population of the United States.

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Today's announcement thus represents not only an acknowledgement of the church in the developing world, but also, arguably, a healthy reminder to Catholics in traditional Western powerhouses such as the United States of where they stand in terms of the Catholic footprint in the early 21st century.

Three other quick observations.

First, among the 19 new cardinals named by Pope Francis are three "honorary" nominees, meaning men who are already over 80 and hence ineligible to take part in a future conclave. Given that the total number of existing cardinal-electors will be 106 when the Feb. 22 consistory takes place, and that three more will age out shortly thereafter, Francis is sticking to the ceiling of having no more than 120 voting cardinals at any time.

This maverick pope, in other words, has shown himself to be a man of tradition at least on this score.

Second, one of those honorary new cardinals is Loris Francesco Capovilla, Titular Archbishop of Mesembria, and the former private secretary of Pope John XXIII. In tandem with the scheduled canonization of John XXIII along with Pope John Paul II in April, the honor for Capovilla clearly reflects the esteem Francis feels for "Good Pope John," the pontiff who called the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Third, the choice of Cardinals of Burkina Faso and Haiti shows concern for people struck by poverty, a vintage touch from the pope who's said he dreams of a "poor church for the poor." Haiti, by many measures among the most impoverished nations on earth, has never had a residential cardinal before.

Joshua McElwee of NCR has a write-up with the full list of new cardinals here:

<http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-chooses-new-cardinals-africa-asia-latin-america>

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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