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Cardinal Burke again in papal spotlight

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today

You might recall that Cardinal Raymond Leo Burke was recently removed by Pontiff Francis from his post at the Congregation of Bishops from where he had sent forth for the past four years some of our nation's most conservative -- and least effective ? prelate pastors.

That pontifical act sent shock waves through the ranks of church observers who weigh morsels to assess Francis determination in church governance reform.

The removal Burke was a public slap in face, a sign of papal displeasure. Burke has been a leading conservative and for years has wielded unaccountable regal clout.

Burke, meanwhile, has been loved by liturgical arch-traditionalists who seek out the favor of princes from a bygone age.

Burke seems to relish standing, arms outstretched, hands facing inward, being dressed in layers of soft cloth, delicate lace, and embroidered gold vestments by men who then assign boys to carry his long red train around the church and to the altar. (See "Ten photos of this Wondrous Prince of the Church.") (See video of dress ceremony.)

Burke's episcopal style sings of hierarchy and privilege and clericalism at a time Francis is doing all he can to downplay all three.

As bishop of La Crosse, Burke welcomed fringe religious orders into the diocese and is remembered for building a Marian shrine and halting support for a Church World Service crop walk. As archbishop of

Saint Louis, he is recalled for dismissing a widely respected archdiocesan religious educator, a Sister of Charity, for simply attending the ordination ceremony of a woman.

His climb up the episcopal ladder has been characterized by a generous sense of self, by division and by a lack of pastoral sensitivity. His subsequent Vatican appointments were sure signs of organizational failure, disregard for the laity, and church leadership that essentially rewards incompetence.

This brings us to yesterday and a brief talk Francis delivered to the Roman Rota, the appellate tribunal, which is overseen by Burke, prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, the highest Vatican judicial body.

The Roman Rota handles, among other matters, annulments and divorce cases. Francis, meanwhile, associates say, very much wants the church to explore new pastoral initiatives so those who have suffered broken marriages are not cut off from the sacraments.

“The Eucharist, he has said, “is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”

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As Francis outlined the profile of an ideal judge, I could not avoid thinking of Burke’s demeanor and record.

Said Francis: On a human level “a judge requires a human maturity.” This is expressed most clearly through, “a detachment from personal views,” the kind of detachment that allows a judge “to immerse himself in the mindset and the legitimate aspirations of the community in which the service takes place.”

If that community is the church and the “legitimate aspirations” are personified in Francis, then his admonition was a polite but firm request to Burke to “get with the program.” And that program? The building of a pastoral church, the anchor of which is the mercy of God.

Francis is not dismissing the idea of justice, just as he never dismissed the idea of sin when pondering a merciful God. He spoke for the need of justice, of fairness -- but within a context. He stressed the need to separate, in any adjudication, “personal tastes, opinions and preferences.”

A judge’s actions must occur, Francis concluded, in spirit of service and trust. A judge, Francis said, works within a context of the community he serves and within the “condition of the faithful who turn to him in trust.”

Cardinal Burke, Vatican judges, you have been served notice.

Fox clarification: *In his role as prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, the highest Vatican judicial body, Burke has only indirect oversight of the Roman Rota, headed by Msgr. Pio Vito Pinto.*

Fox, NCR Publisher, can be reached at tfox@ncronline.org, and can be found on Twitter @ NCRTomFox.

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