

As an American Heads to the Vatican, What Might His Impact Be?

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Anyone trying to gauge the character of the papacy of Benedict XVI should look carefully at his appointment of Archbishop William J. Levada of San Francisco as head of the watchdog Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The appointment was amply reported. It was even celebrated. This was, after all, the highest position any American has ever held in the Vatican, the one that the pope himself held before his election.

But probing into what the appointment might mean has been limited, and since this is a fresh decision made by Benedict in his new capacity rather than leftover business from his former role as a Vatican official, its significance should not be underestimated.

To be sure, there is speculation that Benedict may try to continue in his old role of keeping close watch over Roman Catholic doctrine, just as some American presidents want to be their own secretaries of state. No matter. Archbishop Levada - who will probably be raised to Cardinal Levada within the year - will inevitably be a major force in the new papacy.

The archbishop is naturally a theological conservative. Did anyone expect the new pope to appoint Hans Kung? But the Archbishop Levada soon headed to Rome (he will turn 69 on June 15) is a rather different person from the 46-year-old Monsignor Levada who returned from Rome in 1982 after six years of working for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith - including one year under Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict.

For two years, Monsignor Levada directed the office of the California conference of bishops in Sacramento, learning about the give-and-take of state politics and the details of dealing with government agencies.

Then, after two years as an auxiliary bishop in Los Angeles, he served nine years as archbishop of Portland, Ore., followed by a decade leading the church in San Francisco.

Archbishop Levada has never lost his concern for theological ideas. He has been a leading member of the doctrinal committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and he cemented his ties with Cardinal Ratzinger as the only American bishop on the editorial committee that composed the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church.

In the early 1990's, he was an aggressive presence at meetings of the American bishops, often intervening to oppose whatever he feared might deviate from past teachings or weaken church authority. This was especially true in connection with a much-debated pastoral letter on women's concerns that the bishops finally abandoned for want of consensus.

But for nearly a quarter-century, Archbishop Levada has also had to live out his theology in very practical activities, preaching and presiding in his cathedrals and parishes, raising money for schools and ministries to the poor, counseling and assigning the diminishing numbers of priests, making the church's case in what have been difficult circumstances.

In Oregon, he fought a losing battle against a ballot measure to legalize physician-assisted suicide. In San Francisco, he had to deal with a measure requiring city-financed social service agencies to provide health benefits for domestic partners. By arranging for church agency employees to designate whomever they wanted as a recipient of benefits - whether an aging

relative or a close friend - he satisfied the city's stated concerns without endorsing same-sex relationships.

When Archbishop Levada assumes his responsibilities in Rome, he will do so with 22 years as a bishop, four times the pastoral experience that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger brought to the office in 1981.

The fruit of this experience can be seen in the theological analysis Archbishop Levada prepared for his fellow bishops during last year's intramural battle over the opposition that some of them had mounted against Senator John Kerry's presidential candidacy.

Make no mistake: At the heart of Archbishop Levada's "Reflections on Catholics in Political Life and the Reception of Holy Communion" was a precise and rigorous affirmation of Catholic teaching, as solemnly restated by John Paul II, on abortion and the obligations of church members to oppose and not abet it.

But applying moral principles in concrete situations can also be "at times a complex and difficult task," Archbishop Levada wrote, because of "the political process, conflicting points of view in society, and the recognition that laws may have to take into account prevailing societal attitudes and customs."

He also took note of "the longstanding recognition in Catholic moral teaching that those who make and interpret the law are not always able to deal with ideal or perfect solutions" and must thus distinguish between morally acceptable and unacceptable compromises.

His analysis contained a strong plea for genuine dialogue between bishops and working politicians. Bishops were responsible "for the good order of the church" and clarity about church teaching, he wrote, but they must also be aware that many Americans would view any church penalties on voters or politicians as infringements on political freedom.

"This conflict in perceptions calls for us bishops to exercise our leadership as shepherds with reliance on the virtue of prudence," he concluded. "How will our teaching about the gospel of life best be heard? How can we best be persuasive?"

Archbishop Levada was clearly not proposing these distinctions and complexities as compromises with Catholic teaching but because he believed that they, too, were part of Catholic teaching. What some ultra-conservative Catholics might denounce as a watering-down of doctrine, he undoubtedly saw as a refusal to coarsen it.

What will happen to this mix of theological seriousness and pastoral experience when he returns to Rome is anyone's guess. Will his American sensibility lead him to reform some of the secretive procedures that tend to discredit judgments of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regardless of whether they are defensible? Will he retain the confidence of Pope Benedict? Will he simply do as the Romans do?

There's a drama here that will have no small impact on Roman Catholicism worldwide in the years to come.