

April 2, 2007 - Retirement watch begins as Egan hits 75

By GARY STERN, The Journal News

When Pope Paul VI amended Canon Law in 1966 to require that bishops submit retirement papers at the age of 75, Cardinal Francis Spellman was already 77. But New York's long-ruling archbishop died in office the following year, showing early on how fickle the pope can be about accepting those papers.

Never mind. Whenever a big-name bishop nears the three-quarter century mark, speculation swirls about whether he will be asked by the pope to lean his staff in a corner for special occasions.

This will be especially true today, when Cardinal Edward Egan turns 75.

From the day Egan came to New York in 2000, becoming the region's 12th Catholic boss, it's been widely believed that he would be the first to leave office alive. He was a Roman at heart, the conventional wisdom held, who would close parishes and schools and balance the budget before being rewarded with a plum spot in the Vatican bureaucracy.

Then came the national sex-abuse crisis and widespread dissatisfaction with how Egan handled several high-profile cases.

Priests began to complain about a lack of leadership and pastoral touch, criticisms that were echoed in an anonymous letter in the fall that provoked tremendous discussion about Egan's future.

In December, Egan talked openly in a TV interview about the possibility of retirement: "I think that if I retired I would, maybe, take a little trip and have a little relaxation, but ultimately, sure, I would want to be back in New York."

So what does it all mean? Only Pope Benedict XVI knows.

"There's a lot of buzz, but it's possible that nothing will change for a long time," said Rocco Palmo, overseer of the closely watched Catholic insider blog, Whispers in the Loggia. "Unless Egan indicates that he wishes to go earlier, and I don't see that happening, he's a good bet to stick around at least through the year, if not longer. New York is still the most visible post in American Catholicism, and when it does come down, it will be Benedict's most significant appointment to a diocese to date."

Egan has two significant milestones coming up, which Palmo and others believe Egan will celebrate as archbishop of New York.

On April 15, he will preside over a special Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral to kick off a year of events commemorating the bicentennial of the Archdiocese of New York, which will fall on April 8, 2008.

And on Dec. 15 of this year, Egan will celebrate his 50th anniversary as a priest.

"John Paul was very sympathetic to the argument that if a bishop has an anniversary coming up, he should stay," said the Rev. Thomas Reese, author of "Inside the Vatican." "It's hard to say what Benedict will do."

So everyone is left to try to read the Roman tea leaves.

On the one hand, Benedict accepted the retirement of former Dallas Bishop Charles Grahmann last month, only eight months after Grahmann turned 75.

On the other hand, Cardinal Adam Maida of Detroit is 77 and Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore is 76 - and both are still serving.

George Weigel, an influential Catholic theologian with close ties to the Vatican, wrote in an e-mail about Benedict's initial bishop appointments: "The long-term tale will now be told, however, with appointments to such major sees as Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Louisville, Detroit, Seattle, Portland and New York, all of which are likely to happen in the next two years or sooner."

But then Weigel denied he has inside information about Egan's future.

"I have no idea," he said. "Neither does anyone else."

The question many are asking is whether the increasingly open criticism of Egan from priests will affect his future.

Terrence Tilley, a theology professor at Fordham University and a longtime follower of the comings and goings of bishops, said public grumbling from priests might have the opposite effect from what's intended.

"I would expect a Roman response to be increased support for Egan," he said. "By that I mean I would not expect his mandatory retirement to be accepted. I think he'll stay awhile. They tend to support those who face difficulties."

Who might have a say in Egan's future? The new papal nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, who arrived last year, is a decorated Vatican diplomat. He is said to pay close attention to the media and his opinion on bishops - whatever it might be - weighs heavily in Rome.

There are also several Americans on the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops, which oversees the selection of bishops and other matters. Among them is Cardinal William Levada, former archbishop of San Francisco and Benedict's successor as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Cardinal Bernard Law, the ousted archbishop of Boston, also serves on the congregation.

"Everyone and their mother wants their voice heard on New York," Palmo said.

Joseph Zwilling, Egan's spokesman, said that the digital era is perfect for the spread of rumors and handicapping, but that Egan is unconcerned.

"I know people like to speculate, and 10 years ago we didn't have all these blogs, which fuel the fires for those interested in guessing games," Zwilling said. "The cardinal has been going around telling the priests, 'Don't worry, I'll be here for another 150 years.' This is not something he's focused on at all."

In the end, it's all up to Benedict. Canon 401 requests that a bishop offer his papers upon turning 75 to the pope, "who will make provision after he has examined all the circumstances."

"The pope considers how things are going in a diocese, any other factors, and makes his decision," said Monsignor Joseph Giandurco, a canon lawyer and pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Suffern. "It can range from immediate acceptance of a bishop's resignation to allowing him to stay indefinitely. This Holy Father has done both."

Giandurco noted that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger submitted his resignation at 75 to Pope John Paul II.

"It was not accepted," he said. "At age 78, he was elected pope. One never knows what the Lord has in store."

As the Rev. Michael T. Martine, professor of canon law at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, put it, "It's whatever the Holy Father wants."

One thing the pope can't control is the inevitable conjecture over who may replace Egan, whether next year or in five years. It's a popular guessing game among priests, active laypeople and church analysts, even though there appears to be no real favorite this time around.

During the final period of Cardinal John O'Connor's tenure, the popular choices were Archbishop Edwin O'Brien and Bishop Henry Mansell, both former auxiliary bishops in New York. But another former New York auxiliary bishop who was right up Interstate 95 in Bridgeport, Conn., was John Paul's choice.

"The way I read Pope Benedict, he seems to be appointing people who are pastoral and teaching bishops rather than confrontational bishops," Reese said. "John Paul liked bishops like Cardinal O'Connor, who would tell it like it is and fit right in in New York. Benedict has been appointing people who are more soft-spoken, I would say. But again, who knows?"

O'Brien and Mansell are still considered contenders, and have lingered for more than a decade at the top of many lists. O'Brien remains head of the military archdiocese and Mansell now leads the Archdiocese of Hartford.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan of Milwaukee is the fast riser.

Some say they feel that two current New York auxiliaries, Dennis Sullivan and Gerald Walsh, are in the running.

The name of Archbishop Roberto González Nieves of San Juan started coming up during O'Connor's tenure. Could he be New York's first Hispanic cardinal?

But it's all guesswork. And Egan may not need a successor for some time.

O'Connor reached his 75th birthday in 1995. But he died in 2000 at the age of 80 - as archbishop of New York.

Who's who

Possible contenders for future archbishop of New York

- Archbishop Timothy Dolan of Milwaukee, 57. The St. Louis priest is a former rector of the prestigious North American College in Rome. Took over in Milwaukee in 2002 under difficult circumstances. Young and personable.
- Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, turns 68 on Sunday. One of the best-known Catholic figures in New York and a "leading contender" for many years. Was an auxiliary bishop in New York and twice the rector of St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers. Head of the military archdiocese, which includes Catholics in the U.S. military around the world. Still a regular visitor to New York. Some say his time has passed.
- Archbishop Henry Mansell, 69. The New York priest served at St. John & St. Paul in Larchmont early on. Was an auxiliary bishop under O'Connor before leaving for Buffalo in 1995. Became archbishop of Hartford in 2003. Would be a short-timer at this point in his career. A transitional cardinal?
- Archbishop Roberto González Nieves, 56. Young, charismatic and Puerto Rican. Born in New Jersey but grew up in Puerto Rico. Served in the Bronx as a young priest. Has served as archbishop of San Juan since 1999. Has friends and supporters across the country. An obvious choice to appeal to New York's growing Latino community. But may be too young.
- Bishop Dennis Sullivan, 62. A parish priest for his whole career before being tabbed an auxiliary bishop in 2004. Was pastor at the time of St. John & St. Paul in Larchmont. Spent 21 years at St. Teresa's in Manhattan. As co-vicar general of the archdiocese, he has led planning for the realignment of parishes. Down to earth and generally popular.

Other names mentioned:

- Bishop Gerald Walsh, 64, auxiliary bishop of New York and vicar of development.
- Bishop Timothy McDonnell, 69, of Springfield, Mass., a former auxiliary of New York.
- Archbishop John Myers of Newark, 65, formerly bishop of Peoria, Ill.
- Bishop Arthur Serratelli, 62, of Paterson, N.J.