

11-21-07 - The red hat goes to the pastor

All Things Catholic By John L. Allen, Jr., National Catholic Reporter Conversation Cafe

Baseball manager Leo Durocher may not have meant the phrase "nice guys finish last" in quite the sense it's usually understood, but it nonetheless captures the reality that cut-throat tactics are often a more direct route to advancement than humility and kindness. While things are supposed to be different in the church, that's not always the case, which is perhaps what makes the elevation of Archbishop John Foley to the College of Cardinals this Saturday especially satisfying.

I was quoted in the Philadelphia Inquirer Nov. 18 Nov. 18 calling Foley "the nicest guy in the Vatican," and I meant it. Formerly President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Foley is today the Pro-Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher. While each of the 23 new cardinals who will receive the red hat on Saturday no doubt has a story to tell, I'm going to focus here on Foley because Americans who have lived in Rome can't help thinking of him in some sense as our local pastor.

Four qualities in particular, at least for me, stand out.

A Pastor's Heart: Despite having served for a quarter-century in the Vatican, Foley has always seemed more at home in pastoral settings than in the corridors of ecclesiastical power. Foley is a regular at the Church of Santa Susanna, for example, the American parish in Rome, presiding over confirmations and celebrating Mass on special occasions. (Indeed, Foley is to be at Santa Susanna this Thursday to offer the annual Thanksgiving Mass.) Over the years, legions of people in Rome have stories to tell of times Foley helped them behind the scenes during periods of struggle.

Foley's legendary sense of humor is also part of his pastoral nature. He's a notorious punster; one example involves pointing to the pectoral cross hanging from his neck and asking someone in a mocking tone, "Are you jerking my chain?"

Honesty: Journalists know that while Foley always takes phone calls, he doesn't always have the answers they seek. A typical Foley response to a delicate question goes like this: "I don't have any insider knowledge on that, and if I did, I wouldn't be able to tell you." That can be frustrating for reporters on deadline, but it reflects Foley's deep commitment to truth. He doesn't play the games that talking heads in other walks of life have honed to a fine art, leaving an impression of knowing more than he really does, or telling only half-truths intended to spin a story in a certain direction.

An anecdote makes the point.

In April 2001, Foley addressed a conference on social communications in Rome. Foley told the group that he had sometimes been asked to lie by church authorities, though not in his position at the Council for Social Communications. He said he has steadfastly refused.

Early in his career, Foley said, he worked as an information officer for the U.S. bishops' conference. In those days, reporters were not allowed into bishops' meetings and relied on Foley's briefings to know what was going on. During one closed-door session, Foley said, a bishop denounced ecumenism. Afterwards, another bishop asked Foley if he planned to tell the media about the remark. When he said yes, the bishop said, "What if I asked you not to?" Foley said he replied, "You would be exceeding your authority."

"Not only was what I was asked to do morally wrong; it was also dumb," Foley said. "The truth will always come out."

"Never, never, never tell a lie," Foley said.

Loyalty: Aside from being a faithful friend on a personal level, Foley is also extraordinarily loyal to the institution he serves. That's all the more remarkable given that, if ever a Vatican official had good reason to grouse, he's it. After being named President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in 1984, Foley watched eight consistories come and go, with 214 other men becoming cardinals while he never made the cut. There are, of course, plausible explanations for why he was not elevated -- a surfeit of Vatican cardinals, for one, and the lack of a precedent for a cardinal's red hat going with this particular job. (Foley's predecessor, Cardinal Andrzej Maria Deskur, also entered the college only after he stepped down.) That doesn't explain, however, why he was never promoted to a job with greater responsibility. Over the years, Foley acquired a reputation as the perpetual bridesmaid of the Catholic hierarchy.

Being passed over for advancement wasn't the only slight, intended or not. In February 2005, the talented Bishop Renato Boccardo was removed from the number two position in Foley's office and assigned to the Vatican city-state. It was clear that Pope John Paul II's declining health meant a conclave might be coming, so Foley wrote to the Secretary of State to point out that while other Vatican offices enter a "maintenance" mode when the pope dies, Social Communications goes into over-drive to deal with the avalanche of media interest. Despite that appeal, no new secretary was assigned, so Foley was left under-staffed when the time came. Even though he was technically out of office during the interregnum, Foley put in long hours, and he and his staff did a remarkable job keeping the media informed and organized.

One could go on cataloguing ways in which Foley was sometimes left out in the cold. Through it all, he never lost his sense of humor, and never betrayed resentment. One imagines that's part of the reason that Benedict XVI wanted to honor him this time around, not just by making him a cardinal, but by listing his name second, following only the former *sostituto* and current Prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, Leonardo Sandri.

Humility: Foley's status as the president of a pontifical council would have justified the expense of separate lodgings in Rome, but over the years he has chosen instead to stay at the Villa Stritch, the residence for Americans working in the Vatican. He also drives himself to work, often stopping along the way to offer a lift to someone he knows. These are small gestures, but they reveal much about the man, who has never exploited the privileges of office in order to exalt himself. Each year the North American College in Rome bestows an award upon an American churchman during its annual Rector's Dinner, and in 2004 the honor went to Foley. Instead of cataloguing his accomplishments or dropping names, Foley instead spoke directly to the seminarians that night, telling them that not a day has gone by during his career that he doesn't thank God for the gift of the priesthood. That's Foley in a nutshell -- at his core, he thinks of himself as a priest first, a potentate second.

On a policy level, one can certainly raise critical questions about Foley's 23-year tenure as the Vatican's point person on social communications. For the most part, they concern not so much whether his heart was in the right place, but his capacity to do the political heavy lifting necessary to shape institutional policy.

For example, after Pope Benedict XVI's 2006 lecture at the University of Regensburg, Foley candidly admitted that the episode, in which a passing reference to a 14th century Byzantine emperor triggered a global firestorm, illustrated the need to "foresee possible reactions" to papal statements, and thus to avoid language that might spark undesired blowback. When I asked if he felt the lesson had been learned, he replied: "It should be. Whether or not it has been, I don't know."

One might have justifiably protested, "But it's your job to know." For whatever reason, Foley was always better at modeling communications strategy himself than at bringing the institution along with him. (Granted, the latter task is difficult for anyone; even the more politically-minded Joaquin Navarro-Valls, the former Vatican spokesperson, could only make so much headway against an institutional culture than can charitably be described as "ambivalent" with respect to the press.)

In the end, however, what makes Foley remarkable is less about what job he holds, or how well he does it, than who he is. Few figures have ever succeeded at putting a "human face" on the leadership of the institutional church as well as John Foley. At 72, and in basically solid health, Foley can look forward to many more years of activity, and one hopes that Benedict XVI can find ways to use him as a "goodwill ambassador" for the Vatican and for Catholicism.

In the person of John Foley, Saturday's consistory marks a long-overdue triumph for the nice guys, and that alone makes the occasion worth celebrating.