

"The Snubbing of Bishop Kicanas"

Week of March 14, 2011

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Catholics who have long since given up on the U.S. bishops as pastoral leaders with a credible moral voice will not care one way or the other about the unprecedented election of Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops last November. Catholics who take the same bishops seriously will have had a favorable reaction to his election, if they took notice of it at all.

If some in the latter group of Catholics accord unusually close attention to such matters, they might have been affected by, and believed, the scurrilous last-minute campaign against Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson that, as a seminary rector, he passed on to the priesthood a sexual abuser.

*The New York Times* asked for a comment on the election of Archbishop Dolan, contrary to the tradition that a vice president, in this instance Bishop Kicanas, always succeeds to the presidency of the Conference whenever the vice president is on the ballot, as Bishop Kicanas was. I said simply that, if the bishops did not want Bishop Kicanas as their president, they shouldn't have elected him vice president three years ago.

I didn't take into account, however, that in the intervening three years the Conference has grown even more conservative, thanks to about 30 new appointments (excluding transfers of bishops from one diocese to another or promotions of auxiliary bishops to ordinaries) that were approved by Pope Benedict XVI.

The "Tea Party" or ultra-conservative wing of the Conference felt that they shouldn't have to wait three years to install a genuine conservative in the presidency, and so they (and others) voted for Archbishop Dolan over Bishop Kicanas.

The question is, why didn't Archbishop Dolan himself wait his turn, withdraw as a candidate, and allow Bishop Kicanas to succeed to the presidency of the Conference as every other vice president has done throughout the entire history of the Conference (save two vice presidents who chose not to run)?

That question will haunt Archbishop Dolan, at least in the minds of the few close-watchers of Conference politics. Most U.S. Catholics, however, even New Yorkers, will remain indifferent to the proceedings.

When it is pointed out to them that their archbishop is the new president of the U.S. bishops' Conference, the most common reaction would be a shrug of the shoulders and a non-committal "So?"

Father Thomas Reese, S.J., editor-in-chief of the Jesuit weekly *America* before he was sacked in 2005, observed in his blog for *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post* (November 16, 2010) that the election of Archbishop Dolan and the overt snubbing of Bishop Kicanas signaled that the U.S. bishops "are going to continue their conservative tilt in both the church and American politics."

"This rightward tilt," Father Reese continued, "became evident six years ago when Cardinal Francis George of Chicago was elected vice president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops."

"Moderates," Reese observed, "were fooled into thinking that the bishops had returned to the center three years ago when they elected Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson as vice president at the same time that Cardinal George was elevated to the presidency. They expected Kicanas to be elected president this year, even though he had only defeated Archbishop Timothy Dolan, then of Milwaukee, by one vote."

There is little difference between the two bishops, Reese insisted, but then he pointed out that there *are* significant differences. "Kicanas," he wrote, "is a quiet conciliator who prefers to resolve conflict through dialogue and conversation....Dolan is more extroverted and willing to be aggressive and confrontational when he thinks it is necessary."

Bishop Kicanas' mentor is the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago; Archbishop Dolan's is the late Cardinal John O'Connor of New York. Both men were at loggerheads when they were alive. "That says it all," Father Reese wrote.

Bernardin would almost certainly not have been elected president of the Conference had he been running today, nor would have Archbishops John Quinn of San Francisco, John Roach of St. Paul and Minneapolis, or Bishop James Malone of Youngstown.

"The bishops conference," Father Reese wrote, "has been radically changed by the bishops appointed by Pope John Paul II." The only amendment that I would make to Reese's statement is to add the words "and Pope Benedict XVI."

I would, however, agree with Father Reese's next sentence: "This is not going to change in the foreseeable future."

Nor will the situation in the Catholic Church worldwide.

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"Merging Parishes"  
 Week of March 21, 2011  
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY  
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Many years ago priests sometimes gave voice to a gallows-humor sort of comment, "Last one out blow out the sanctuary lamp."

When they made this remark, there were rectories with four priests and five well-attended Masses on Sunday, on the hour from 7 until 11. Some pastors were so worried about clearing the parking lot for the next Mass that they began distributing Communion right after the Consecration.

Little did they (or any of us) know that the Catholic Church would come upon such hard times in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup>.

Could we have expected long established parishes merging with one or two others? Could we have expected that some parishes would close entirely, and that there would be sit-ins of parishioners protesting the closures?

The Archdiocese of Boston recently announced the launching of a major effort to reorganize its parish structures in response to three challenges: declining Mass attendance, diminished financial resources, and a shortage of priests.

According to an article by Lisa Wangsness, religion writer for *The Boston Globe* ("Diocese takes steps to retool parishes," 2/3/11), Mass attendance in the archdiocese has fallen from 70% in the heyday of Catholic practice to 20% today. She cites Father Richard Erikson, Vicar General of the archdiocese, as her source.

Forty percent of the 291 parishes in the archdiocese are expected to finish this year in the red, and the number of active diocesan priests is expected to drop from about 350 this year to just 180 a decade from now.

As a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Hartford, I was sent to study for the priesthood in Boston, at St. John's Seminary in the Brighton section of the city.

I can recall while there, either in the late 1950s or very early in the 1960s, when, at an ordination ceremony, Cardinal Richard J. Cushing, then Archbishop of Boston, complained from the cathedral pulpit (the other ordination was being conducted by one of his auxiliary bishops in the West Roxbury section of Boston) that the archdiocese was ordaining "only" 65 priests that year. He had expected and hoped for 100!

How times and circumstances have changed! Boston is lucky to have five men ordained for service in the archdiocese.

In 2004 the new Archbishop of Boston, now-Cardinal Sean O'Malley, realized that he had to do something to address these three challenges. Upon the recommendation of a commission that he had established, parishes were closed and parishioners of the closed parishes were sent to another nearby parish. This led to much controversy, and in some cases sit-ins and appeals to Rome.

Today adjustments have been made. Instead of closing parishes, the idea is to reorganize parish structures. Neighboring parishes would be merged into a single parish, but Mass would continue to be celebrated in multiple churches.

Each clustered parish would be run by a single pastor, with help from a team of priests as well as a consolidated parish council, finance council, and parish staff.

Some dioceses still use the now-discarded plan of Boston. For example, three parishes in the Dorchester section of the city were merged, but they retained their own parish councils and finance councils. The pastor of these three merged parishes had to attend all the meetings.

This is the case in many dioceses today. Priests who serve as pastors of merged parishes are burning out before their parishioners', families', and friends' eyes.

The proposed plan for the restructuring of parishes in the Archdiocese of Boston is certainly better than the path that other dioceses are still following. But it remains to be seen how the new Boston plan works out. Certainly the earlier plan did not.

Individuals can cite parish churches (especially in Florida) that are overflowing. But the national trend is similar to Boston's, the recent CARA study notwithstanding.

There is a dramatic fall-off in priestly vocations. Many parishes have severe financial difficulties. And there has been a sharp decline in Mass attendance nationwide. These are realities which cannot be denied or ignored.

In the meantime, the Church cries out for effective leadership—bishops chosen not for their conservative credentials and loyalty to the Holy See, but for their pastoral aptitude and credibility.

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