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Who Is Marc Ouellet?

Michael W. Higgins July 22, 2010 - 12:30pm

Marc Ouellet, primate of Canada and archbishop of Quebec City, has a new job. Two, actually. Last month, Pope Benedict named him prefect of the Congregation for Bishops and president of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. Given his years as a professor and seminary rector in Colombia, along with his years advising the Commission for Latin America, the latter appointment is not surprising. His role in the far more influential and prestigious office that names bishops throughout the world, however, invites greater examination.

Ouellet is very much the Roman. He was educated at the Angelicum and at the Gregorian University; he served as chair of dogmatic theology at the John Paul II Institute for Studies in Marriage and the Family at the Pontifical Lateran University; he was secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity; and he worked on the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. With that impressive résumé, Ouellet has enjoyed the confidence of two popes. He is both scholarly and spiritual in a manner that reflects the predilections of John Paul and Benedict. And, perhaps most important, Ouellet knows how the Vatican operates.

But what about the world outside of Rome? When Ouellet was appointed archbishop of Quebec City by John Paul II in 2002, it raised eyebrows. (John Paul made him a cardinal the following year.) After all, Ouellet had been out of the country for decades. He was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Amos in Quebec in 1986, and joined the Society of St. Sulpice in '72, but missed Quebec's secularizing "Quiet Revolution." That cultural, political, and social upheaval ended Catholic hegemony in the province. Before the upheaval, the church was omnipresent. It enjoyed the deference and assistance of the government (nearly all the province's social-service, health, and educational institutions were church-run); and its clergy rolls were ample. But the Quiet Revolution secularized everything. Nothing was spared.

The change was largely orchestrated by lay and clerical leaders who saw the need to upend centuries of tightly controlled Jansenist Catholicism. Two clerics were especially committed to the vision that would free Quebec from its cocoon: Georges-Henri Lévesque, a Dominican friar and founder of the Faculty of Social Science at Laval University, and Alphonse-Marie Parent, chair of the Parent Commission, which radically reorganized the secondary school system and effectively abolished the old classical colleges throughout the province. In addition, future political figures such as Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Jean Marchand, and Gérard Pelletier—all Catholics—were coming into their own as architects of a new Quebec, and indeed a new Canada.

But like an adolescent enjoying newfound freedom, the emerging Quebec rejected much of its Catholic past. Vocations plummeted, hierarchical influence waned, and Catholic politicians and writers bracketed their religious affiliation. A number of Catholic landmarks were gutted, and religion in general was marginalized—both culturally and politically.

Still, apart from issues of management, property, and institutional control, this proved a fecund time for the postconciliar church. Bishops like Paul-Emile Léger, Maurice Roy, Louis-Albert

Vachon, and laypeople like Claude Ryan helped to forge new directions for a church in turmoil. The French Revolution had arrived on the shores of the St. Lawrence at the same time as the Second Vatican Council. It made for a heady and sometimes lethal mix.

That is the world Marc Ouellet returned to in 2002—a Quebec utterly changed.

He didn't like what he found. Determined to recover something of the old order, Ouellet quickly set about a restorationist agenda. Having spent many years in Europe, where he came to share then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's critique of the continent's de-Christianization, perhaps it was inevitable that his own pastoral style would conflict with that of his brother bishops. Like John Paul, Ouellet understood the power of mass assemblies, grand liturgical celebrations, and direct cultural engagement. And so, among other things, he brought a Eucharistic Congress to Quebec, hoping to re-create the success of an earlier version held in Quebec. But the old Quebec was gone. New strategies proved necessary.

One of the defining features of Ouellet's style is his habit for generating controversies. In May of this year, for instance, while supporting the federal government's international maternal health-care initiative—a project that will not fund abortions in developing countries—the cardinal lamented that abortion was a “moral crime.” The media understood his words to be rallying call for the recriminalization of abortion, even though he neither said nor implied as much. The Supreme Court of Canada struck down the abortion law in 1988 and nothing has replaced it. No Prime Minister—from the Catholics Jean Chretien and Paul Martin to the Evangelical Stephen Harper—dared to reintroduce legislation, leaving Canada as one of the few nations with no abortion law.

The cardinal's comments were neither incendiary nor surprising. But, unlike his brother bishops who understand the difficulties of the terrain, move gingerly through the minefields, and try to rebuild credibility as religious leaders in a secularizing world, Ouellet plunges in where even angels fear to tread.

The extreme reactions he elicits have become a defining feature of his leadership. A recent poll has shown that 94 percent of Quebecers oppose Ouellet's position on abortion. His episcopal colleagues are aware of the polls. They understand that an effective strategy for consciousness-raising requires rebuilding the church's credibility in a province that has—in a generation—moved from being as Catholic as preconciliar Ireland to being as secular as France.

Yet, Cardinal Ouellet, in spite of his capacity for stirring resistance, is approachable, personable, and a man of deep faith. I spent time with him a couple of years ago when he came to the parish of St. Francis de Sales in New Brunswick. He was presiding at an anniversary Mass of uncommon liturgical beauty. The choir sung superbly. There were liturgical dancers—and even altar girls. It was an elegant rite defined by a deep festive spirit. Ouellet was clearly in his element, delivered a homily in eloquent French, and effortlessly mingled with parishioners. If he brings those pastoral and spiritual sensibilities to bear in his new role as “bishop-maker,” Catholics worldwide will benefit. Yes, candidates he recommends will be ecclesiological conservative, but, one hopes, neither doctrinaire nor unapproachable. In other words, like the man who helped to choose them, Ouellet's bishops will be real pastors.

