

Interview with Cardinal Tobin



Newly Minted Cardinal Tobin Talks With the Register. In an exclusive interview, one of the trio of new U.S. cardinals offers his perspectives on a range of key Church matters.

VATICAN CITY — Cardinal Joseph Tobin was one of three American prelates to receive a red hat on Saturday.

A Redemptorist missionary and the eldest of 13 children, the newly elevated 64-year-old cardinal was born in Detroit, Michigan, ordained a priest in 1978 and went on to become superior general of the Redemptorists in 1997. From 2010 until 2012, he served as secretary at the Congregation for Institutes

of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, where he helped to supervise a critical inspection of 341 institutes of apostolic women religious in the United States.

In this exclusive Nov. 21 interview with the Register in Rome, Cardinal Tobin says he does not exclude giving holy Communion to the divorced and remarried, but can understand those who want more “precision” in *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), Pope Francis’ summary apostolic exhortation based on the synods on the family. The new cardinal, who was archbishop of Indianapolis until recently appointed archbishop of Newark, New Jersey, also expresses his esteem for Vice President-elect Mike Pence and will encourage the new administration to defend pro-life issues.

Your Eminence, you said you were shocked by the appointment. Has it now sunk in?

Well, yes, there was a certain concreteness to this weekend! But, you know, I suppose when I take a broader view of the service to which I’ve been invited, it is a bit daunting. Both the consistory and the Masses yesterday were on the one hand marvelous and on the other hand a bit dream-like, I guess.

There’s also the awesome responsibility.

There’s that, and I think the other thing is the double whammy of being named unexpectedly to the College [of Cardinals], and then being asked to move. I have a number of people here from Indiana, and it’s a really bittersweet moment for us.

About your appointment to Newark: Was that made before you knew of your elevation as cardinal?

No; it came two weeks afterwards. Some people say to me, “Thank you for saying Yes.” I say that I didn’t have an option. I was simply told: “The Holy Father has appointed you to Newark.”

Do you know why that was, as it’s so close to New York, which is already a cardinalatial see?

No, I don’t. I did protest to the nuncio. I said that “I’m a missionary.” That’s been the self-understanding I’ve had: It’s my vocation; I go where I’m sent. But I said it seems terribly unfair to the people in Indiana.

To move on to the Holy Father, it’s said you share the same pastoral vision.

I think it’s much better articulated by him, but, yes, there are some common elements.

What would you say that vision is?

I suppose in comparison to a vision of the Church which would be much more of the reduced, and highly engaged [one], I have more of the broader, I guess, view of the bigger picture of the field hospital, if you will, which first tries to get people into some sort of relationship with God and then goes on to explain just what that relationship requires, according to the word of God and Tradition. I suppose if you want a metaphor, I’ve always been interested in pilgrimage, both in literature like Chaucer, and I’ve been fascinated by it because it seems that even in the most secularized societies,

the notion of pilgrimage still retains some validity.

We Redemptorists have a small church in kind of the southern part of the Netherlands, and still, every weekend, several thousand people arrive in one of the most secularized countries in the world. I've seen it in France, Santiago di Compostela. What interested me in Santiago is the botafumeiro, the big incense burner that can sweep across the nave of the basilica. It wasn't there simply for ascetic or religious reasons. People say that, especially in the Middle Ages, the folks who arrived there were ... [smelly]! So a Church which still needs a botafumeiro is part of the vision, and I think Francis has that, as well. I don't think he wants to diminish in any way the radical commitment that being a disciple means. I think he wants to first be able to get people in the tents, so we can talk with them.

What do you value most in the Pope's pastoral vision? Is it perhaps his outreach to bring in those who wouldn't otherwise ever listen to the Church?

I've had the privilege to work with several different pontiffs, kind of marginally with John Paul II, as superior general here. We'd have vocational meetings, and I think we had a good relationship. It was much closer with Benedict. It was a delight to see him on Saturday ... and when he saw me, he looked up at me and said, "Padre Tobin! We've known each other a long time." I said, "Yes, we have." First, it was in his capacity as prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and then as Holy Father.

I think each of them brought incredible gifts to their Petrine service. I think what Francis brings is a sort of language that goes beyond the verbal. He has this kind of natural grace of combining words that people can understand with gestures that they can understand, as well. For me, that is a sort of natural humility, and I believe his self-knowledge. I recall the morning after his visit to Philadelphia, I was packing my things to go back to Indianapolis. Listening to the news, I heard an American journalist ask him on the impromptu press conference on the plane how the Holy Father felt now that he was practically a rock star in the United States. He got quite serious and said that's a "dangerous place" [regarding terminology] as I recall, and that "I must ensure that I do what I do for the right reasons." To me, when I thought about it afterwards: It sort of conveyed a certain self-knowledge that he felt that perhaps adulation could become intoxicating. I think he has a very developed asceticism of the cross. In the Joy of the Gospel [Francis' 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*], one of the criticisms he makes of clergy, religious, is what he calls "pastoral agents" who flee from the cross. For him, the cross is part of the service.

Some are concerned he's taking his reforms too far, that he's wanting to revolutionize the Church, molding it in his own image, and not taking the whole Church with him and not having recourse to those who are critical. Do you agree with any of that?

My experience of it would be different — of him. I don't have any sense that this is what you would call a narcissistic exercise. I think he's sincere, and I think he places a high premium on the role of the Holy Spirit, which puts him in a tradition with St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It was interesting that, before the synod [on the New Evangelization] in 2012, when I was still working here, I was studying the documents, and I recall the preliminary documents of the synod mentioned the words "discernment" 24 times. I think the Church was realizing even then, under Benedict, that there aren't pat or trite solutions. So I suppose any sort of movement can appear to some to be revolutionary. I

think many of the people on, one can say, the left side of the aisle are distressed that the Holy Father has not gone far enough. I would say he sees himself in the nave of the church, not in one of the esoteric side chapels.

He's admired for making the Church appear to the wider world as not so condemnatory, and so attracting newcomers into the Church. Is that your view, too?

I think you have a better chance of people listening to you if you don't open with your best right hook. And once again, he stands in the Tradition here, because you'll recall that Benedict XVI said and wrote several times that if you propose the Gospel first and foremost as a moral code, you distort what the Gospel is. You recall that the Gospel, first and foremost, is the possibility of encountering the Person who is the living God. That encounter, as it says in the opening line of the Joy of the Gospel, will make all the difference. But that wasn't an exercise in creative writing for him. He was drawing, I think, on the Tradition and an established path that had been opened.

To go on to *Amoris Laetitia*, like the Holy Father, you said in a recent interview that the document cannot simply be reduced to a question of "Yes or No" in a specific pastoral situation. Are you, therefore, saying moral teachings such as those given by the Ten Commandments, and particularly in this case of the Sixth, on adultery, are gray, according to circumstance? Because some argue it is clear where the Church teaches on this; it is a clear "Yes" and "No" choice.

I think there's an effort in some parts of the Church — which I understand — to get a certain precision, or punctuality and, I think, to take a document which is theological and pastoral and try and consider it in a different field, which we might call the juridic. I don't believe the Holy Father is proposing precise answers, but he said if you want to get to the answer in life, this is the way you go. This is the process you follow. As bishops, we need to play a greater role, and we need to do it together.

Behind a lot of this is an ecclesiological shift, which is not unknown in the history of the Church, but I think after a century or two of a relationship, the value of a bishop in a particular Church and the Roman pontiff, there is now an emerging effort, at least I think by the Holy Father, to give value to synodality among the bishops themselves. But synodality doesn't mean something akin to the way I play the piano — that the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. It means that bishops, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, apply the revealed word of God and the norms of our Tradition to concrete situations. This I think, from the Council of Jerusalem in 50 A.D., has been at the service of the apostolic college.

The argument regarding this is that, when it comes to morals, there has to be precision, because to go down the wrong path can be very dangerous, placing one's soul in jeopardy. Has that precision been clouded by this document?

I think that every traditional school of theology that I know has never given a completely scientific objectivity to a moral decision. The conditions of that person and his or her own situation always come into play. You can think of what we learned in catechism about the three conditions for mortal sin: One is the gravity of the act itself; the others have to do with the person's own circumstances, the freedom of the will and sufficient forethought.

Do you, therefore, believe a divorced-and-remarried couple not living in continence can receive holy Communion in some cases?

I've not run into, or applied, the norm in that way, but I'd not exclude it. I think there are possibilities, for example, of an abandoned mother with children. So I would not exclude the possibility myself, yes.

The argument behind the Dubia is that it has been interpreted in the way you and others suggest; and then you have Cardinal Raymond Burke and Archbishop Charles Chaput, for example, who say admission to holy Communion could never be allowed in such cases.

As a result, the four cardinals who signed the Dubia argue there is this confusion, and that this confusion is leading to disunity. What do you say to this?

Well, for me, one of the solutions is for Archbishop Chaput, Cardinal Burke, Cardinal Tobin and others to come together in a dialogue that's not conducted through the media. We can invoke the Holy Spirit, speak sometimes with the frankness that Paul and Peter shared, and trust that the Holy Spirit will lead us to the correct application of the teaching of this magisterial statement.

But one of the reasons why the Dubia came about, and certainly why they were made public, is because the Pope has decided not to dialogue or respond to them; and although he talks about building bridges, he's not doing that with those who are critical of it, who are standing up for the moral law in these cases. Should there be more dialogue on this issue?

I wouldn't accept that narrative necessarily, that the Pope has just refused to dialogue with Cardinal Burke or Archbishop Chaput. I don't know. Maybe he might be expecting that the prior dialogue is missing because in this case you're speaking of Americans, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. I think that probably a conversation among us, and if there was some further guidance needed coming from the episcopal conference, rather than from individual bishops, may evoke quite a different response. I don't know if the Pope is planning a response to this or not. This all emerged in the last week or so, so I haven't really studied the chronology here.

Referring to your time in the Congregation for Religious, what do you think of the matter related to the Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate? [Following complaints by some senior friars to the Congregation for Religious, Benedict XVI authorized an inquiry into some of the practices of the traditional institute].

I have a community [of FFIs] in my archdiocese, and they're doing rather well. The sort of intervention by the Holy See was just in its nascent form when I left, so I'm not really going to comment a whole lot on that because I'm not aware of what has happened since. I do know this: The problem began with the friars themselves. The Church authority very frequently doesn't get involved until it's clear there's a problem that can't be solved, using normal organs of governance of a religious order, which would be a general chapter followed by a general government.

So it wasn't as though the congregation leafed through the religious orders and said: "Well, let's find a traditional one we can persecute." That wasn't the case at all. It was the friars themselves who called for the intervention.

The general chapter had decided to take decisions which the general government did not accept and kind of went the other way. I think there are other details that would at least give the Holy See pause, because an Institute of Pontifical Right has been approved by the Holy See, and so the Holy See has a sort of responsibility. I said this about the American sisters, as well. This is why the Holy See is interested in this, because it's approved you, and it has a responsibility to ensure that you're faithful to your charism and your mission of the Church. So, no, I would not accept that it's a devaluing of traditional religious practices that is at the root of all of this. It's really about governance.

Turning to politics, you had a dispute with former Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, now vice president-elect, on immigration. What is your view on the probable approach to immigration by the forthcoming Trump administration, and how will you try to work with them?

I really hope the administration will invite us into a dialogue — us being the American Catholic bishops — which was not the case in prior administrations. There was a certain animus [from the Obama administration].

But not on the issue of immigration?

No, not on immigration, but, of course, the Congress was paralyzed by its own polarization to deal effectively with the necessary reform of immigration law. I think there has been a lot of unhelpful rhetoric in the campaign and a sort of demonizing of refugees and immigrants.

But you understand the state has a right and duty to defend its borders and national security and all of that.

Yes, and I think the immigration law is broken now in the United States. I think there's a need to clarify it, and according to ethical principles. I don't accept the fact that the United States is under attack by waves of immigrants. That's just not the case.

It seems the Trump administration will fight for a number of issues of great concern for the Church, especially in the right-to-life area. Will you be encouraging them in that?

Oh, yes, certainly. As you point out, it's very difficult to understand. ... I think I know what Gov. Pence's position is. And I should say that Gov. Pence and I had, and have, a good and very respectful relationship. What I admire in him very much is his way of presenting himself, and I've defended him on this, because he says, "I am a Christian and an American and a conservative." And he has been raked over the coals by some journalists in Indianapolis for not saying he's an American first. I've said in his defense: To a believer, that sounds idolatrous, to put your national identity ahead of your identity as a disciple of Jesus. So I think he's very sincere in his religious beliefs.

There's a lot of common ground there.

Yes, there is. We still talk to each other. I think whatever transpired between us, I had said to him: "Polemics have to be fed, and I don't feed them," and he hasn't either.

Edward Pentin is the Register's Rome correspondent.

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