

# **CARDINAL CODY, CARDINAL BERNARDIN, AND POPE LEO XIV**



Pope Leo XIV

As a pastor, I and my clergy colleagues are shaped by a wide variety of forces, not the least of which is the situation in the world and the church at the time we attended seminary and were ordained for service in the church. As I look at all the news about the newly elected Pope Leo XIV, I can't help but see how he was shaped by his early life in his tumultuous hometown of Chicago . . .

When the now-Pope Leo XIV was but Robert Prevost, a young Catholic boy, there were two major forces in his native Chicago. One was the legendary Richard J. Daley, the authoritarian Irish-Catholic mayor who ruled the city from the day Prevost was born until Daley's death 21 years later. The other was Cardinal John Cody,

the equally authoritarian ruler of the Archdiocese of Chicago from 1965 to 1982. When Cody was transferred from New Orleans to Chicago, stories were told that the local New Orleans priests sang the classic hymn *Te Deum* in celebration.

While the Second Vatican Council tried to push the Roman Catholic church into a more collegial mode of operation, Cody was among those who dug in their heels. It didn't help matters that Cody was at the center of a double scandal – over a million dollars had disappeared from the church's books, and his cousin/mistress/aunt's step-daughter (the exact relationship varied depending on who you asked) Helen Dolan Wilson. She had followed him to his post in New Orleans, then to Chicago, receiving various small positions arranged by Cody and living in circumstances well beyond her seemingly meager financial resources. The Chicago Sun-Times published a blockbuster set of articles about Cody in late 1981, which included the revelation that the US attorney was investigating Cody and the Archdiocese. Cody fought it by delay and deflection, and succeeded insofar as he died the next year without having been formally indicted, and the investigation died with him.

Cody's successor as Archbishop was Joseph Bernardin, who could not have been more unlike Cody. Where Cody was aloof, Bernardin was personable. Where Cody was autocratic, Bernardin was collegial. Where Cody pronounced, Bernardin discussed. Where Cody's world was centered on the Catholic church, Bernardin was anxious to engage his ecumenical colleagues, as seen in 1989, when Lutherans and Roman Catholics in Chicago signed a groundbreaking covenant.

On May 13, 1989, the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Archdiocese of Chicago entered a historic covenant, the nation's first such accord. The churches were brought together by their respective bishops at the time –

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and Bishop Sherman G. Hicks – to cooperate in ministry, to promote dialogue and collaboration on issues of faith and mutual concern, both theological and pastoral, and to deepen the unity existing between the two churches.

As a child, any Prevost family discussions about the church would have been filled with stories of Cardinal Cody. As a newly-ordained priest and member of the Augustinian order, Bernardin would have been equally prominent in family conversations. Even though Prevost would by this time have begun his ministry elsewhere, moving between Peru, Rome, and Chicago, it is hard to imagine that the epic contrast between Cody and Bernardin would not be part of his own self-understanding of what it means to be a priest.

Looking at the biography of the new pope posted by the Vatican News Service, it's easy to see which model of ministry young Father Prevost chose to embody for himself. Four and a half years ago, Steven Millies, the head of the Bernardin Center, wrote an opinion piece in the *National Catholic Reporter* on the 25th anniversary of Bernardin's death. Reading it today, it certainly appears to me that Bernardin was one to whom Prevost looked at with admiration:

In Bernardin, Catholics had a leader who anticipated the style and ministry of Pope Francis in his openness to dialogue and his efforts to engage the world in constructive conversations. But Bernardin's final years also anticipated the sort of opposition Francis has faced, especially among American Catholics.

The seeds of our divisions, as Catholics and Americans, were being watered in 1996. As those seeds have blossomed and propagated in 2021, we can look back on Bernardin to understand what has

happened and how things might be different.

Bernardin was the Roman Catholic archbishop of Chicago from 1982 until his death, but his importance stretched far beyond Chicago. No bishop in the U.S. could be associated more with the church's efforts after Vatican II to engage and embrace the modern world as St. John XXIII had hoped when he called the council.

The title of Millies' piece was "If we'd listened to Cardinal Bernardin, the Catholic Church would not be where it is today." If the church at large had not listened to Bernardin, it is clear that the young boy, then young priest, and now Pope Leo listened to him.

And as the saying goes, a new pope may have to take the church as it is, but he doesn't have to leave it that way – which may have been why Francis chose Prevost to head the Vatican office charged with recommending who should be named a bishop and which bishops should serve in which places. Francis had more than a few run-ins with bishops like Cody during his tenure (the name Raymond Burke comes quickly to mind), and had no desire to elevate folks who would follow Cody's example. Francis chose Prevost to be the church's servant in helping select its leadership for precisely this reason.

And when the cardinals in the conclave were looking for someone to lead the Roman Catholic church at its highest level, they appear to have confirmed Francis' judgement. The church, they seemed to have said, needs more servant-leaders like Bernardin and Francis, and fewer autocrats like Cody and Burke.

As Francis might have put it, in Prevost, the cardinals selected a shepherd who smells like the sheep.