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Anna Arco meets an American priest who has agreed, with some reluctance, to take a senior role in the Roman Curia



Fr Joseph Tobin meets Pope Benedict XVI in 2008. He is flanked by Cardinal Franc Rodé (CNS photo/L'Osservatore Romano)

Fr Joseph Tobin has just sold his bicycle, a sign that the relative calm of his Oxford sabbatical is coming to an end. Next week he will be in Rome helping to run the Vatican dicastery that looks after the nearly a million souls in religious and consecrated life.

When the 58-year-old Redemptorist voiced his reluctance to take up the appointment Pope Benedict XVI's Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone reminded him of words spoken in Pope Benedict's inaugural homily. The Holy Father said that in becoming Pope he must assume "an enormous task, which truly exceeds all human capacity". If Benedict could assume the papacy, then Fr Tobin could become the secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Cardinal Bertone said.

The tall and broad-shouldered Michigan native fills the little sitting room with his surprisingly gentle presence. He jokes that he's not quite sure why he has been appointed except that someone opened a book and put a finger on his name. He comes across as a person who will listen and deliberate before he acts. Over a cup of tea, with the rain pouring outside, he talks about living in Britain's secular culture, the Roman Curia he is about to join and the challenges of his new job.

Born in Detroit to an Irish-Catholic family, Fr Tobin is the oldest of 13 children. The family are close: when Cardinal Bertone's momentous phone call came a few weeks ago, Fr Tobin was painting his mother's house in Ontario.

Ordained to the priesthood in 1978, Fr Tobin became the consultor for his order, the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, in Rome in 1991, before being elected superior general in 1997 and re-elected in 2003.

Fr Tobin, who becomes archbishop by virtue of the new job, expects the challenges to be similar to those he faced when leading the Redemptorists: primarily to listen, learn and understand. Laughing a bit ruefully, he sounds a more practical note. Being secretary of the Congregation for Religious will most likely entail a great deal of administrative work. This is something he's had to do all his life, but it doesn't get him out of bed in the morning.

The Church can be compared to a lush spiritual ecosystem, he says, which needs variety to survive and flourish.

"My hope is that somehow I can serve the whole ecosystem but in a special way the people whose lives express that particular gift. And there's a variety even within the consecrated life. You have everything from traditional monks to modern urban communities of religious to hermits to consecrated women and men of all stripes and varieties."

Cardinal Bertone wanted him to start at the Congregation for Religious right away, he says, as position has been empty for eight months, and the entire department has been run by the other undersecretary, a Salesian nun. Fr Tobin says he has tied up things, but that there were a few engagements in Ireland he needs to keep before heading to Rome this week. The date for his ordination as archbishop will be set upon his arrival.

Back in May Fr Tobin was also appointed as one of the four visitors to Ireland's religious houses in the wake of the abuse crisis that has rocked the country. It is unclear whether he will continue in this role given his new appointment.

Running the Congregation will be no easy task, as veteran Vatican reporter John Allen points out, what with the large-scale and unpopular visitation of American women religious underway and the need to oversee the clean-up of the Legion of Christ. But Fr Tobin also speaks of other areas that need his department's attention.

“For example, the women's congregations in Africa which are sometimes bullied and, I think, more frequently, abandoned and left to their own devices. There are a lot of diocesan orders of Sisters who were founded by a bishop and if the bishop dies the new bishop may not have the same sort of care and concern for the order.

“Even members of well-established congregations of men and women in Africa face untold difficulties because they share the lot of the people they're living with. The question of how to reform religious women and men today for a modern world and a modern Church is a world-wide challenge.

“And then there are new orders springing up, to help them discern their way and to help them to see what's the best way for them to follow Christ.

“That's a few challenges there,” he adds, by way of understatement.

Despite 12 years of service in Rome, the burly ice hockey-playing Redemptorist comes across as a man who has kept himself away from the machinations and plotting for which the Curia is famous. He is keen to stress he is not a Vatican insider.

“Yes, I've been in correspondence with the Vatican over my service to the order,” he says. “But I've had to remind people when I go home and talk with friends and they say, ‘How are things at the Vatican?’ and I say, ‘I don't know. I don't work there’.

“Our general house is on the other side of the river so I’ll have to learn some of the ins and outs and then the priorities.”

Would he say the Vatican is sometimes disconnected from the Church or does it just seem like that sometimes?

“I think it can seem very disconnected, especially from particular churches,” Fr Tobin says carefully. “I think those who work in the Vatican have to be aware of that.”

He describes spending half the year on the road during his time as superior-general of the Redemptorists, living with his brothers and the people they serve around the world and draws a parallel. There needs to be more communication between the Vatican and the local churches.

“But my hope is that the Vatican’s relationship with the local churches can be a sort of creative tension. I think life without tension would be very boring and useless. We can’t walk, we can’t talk, we can’t sing without tension. You need to have tension in your vocal chords and your back, let alone a guitar. However, tension can be destructive. The challenge is to recognise the diversity of gifts and the plurality of churches and the one spirit that unites us. And I think that is the adventure of a lifetime.”

Does the Roman Curia need to change its culture and become more transparent and sensitive?

“On the one hand it is the oldest bureaucracy in the world,” he says. “People love to say that. On the other hand, that bureaucracy, as one of our historians pointed out to me when I was ranting about the Curia: ‘Don’t forget, it guided the Church through a couple of world wars and great depressions and times when the Pope had died or was kidnapped by Napoleon.’ In that sense it has provided a service, but I think it has to be humble and make sure it is service and not simply bureaucracy.” Fr Tobin has spent the last eight months taking a well-deserved break attached to Blackfriars Hall, Oxford, and staying with the De La Salle Brothers. He pursued his interest in the rise of secularisation and secular culture, attending seminars by the sociologist of religion and anthropologist Peter Clarke, studying at the Las Casas Institute and taking classes at Blackfriars.

He is sad to miss the Pope’s visit to Britain. He was hoping for a seat on the Blackfriars/Oxford Oratory bus.

He says it would have been interesting to observe the visit given the climate in Britain at the moment. Part of his reason for being in Oxford is his realisation that he had never experienced European expressions of secularised culture.

As he will be running the day-to-day business of religious orders and apostolic institutes, does he think that religious and consecrated life will play a more crucial role in the changing Church?

“I think that religious life does have a place to play,” he says. “And interestingly enough, if you look at the official statements of the Church there has been a change or at least a development from the Vatican Council which saw religious life as essential for the holiness of the Church. I think it was *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul’s statement on religious life. He said it’s essential for the Church, so it wasn’t simply a qualified ‘for the holiness of the Church’.

“Having said that, I really believe, if you want a caricature, that the future of the Church is lay: in terms of sheer numbers, appreciation of the gift of baptism and the common priesthood of the faithful. These make that a real possibility.

“However, I think that the Church would be poorer without this form of life as an alternative way to follow Christ.”

Anna Arco