

New York Catholics get an affable archbishop: Steven Avella of Milwaukee

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Steven Avella, a Roman Catholic priest in Milwaukee, said his counterparts in the Archdiocese of New York should soon expect a phone call from their new boss—Archbishop Timothy Dolan.

“He’ll start phoning guys right away,” said Avella, 57, a historian at Marquette University who served under Dolan during the archbishop’s seven years as head of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. “He’ll find out when their ordination anniversaries are, look after the older guys, go visit them. He’s a guy who’s close to his co-workers, who makes them feel they’re worth something.”

When Pope Benedict XVI appointed Dolan, 59, as the new archbishop of New York February 23, he placed a friendly face in the nation’s most prestigious Catholic pulpit, elevating a Midwesterner known for his pastoral touch to the upper echelons of the church hierarchy.

With 2.5 million Catholics in an area stretching from Manhattan to the Catskill Mountains, the New York archdiocese is the second largest in the U.S. Dolan will be officially installed April 15 at St. Patrick’s Cathedral.

“He’s a pastoral man who knows the teachings of the church, knows the rules, but his use of power is persuasive rather than coercive,” said Avella.

In some ways, Dolan is a study in contrasts to his predecessor, Cardinal Edward Egan. Egan, who submitted his resignation upon turning 75 in April 2007, was known as an aloof administrator, more skilled at balancing budgets than boosting morale among his priests—a keen concern for a church in which ordinations are swiftly falling.

David O'Connell, president of Catholic University in Washington, where Dolan earned a doctorate in church history, praised the archbishop's "personal warmth, hearty laugh, and great sense of humor."

But not all Catholics had such high praise for Dolan. The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) says he did not do enough to remove abusive priests from ministry during his seven years in Milwaukee. Dolan entered office after it was revealed that his predecessor, Archbishop Rembert Weakland, paid \$450,000 to a seminarian who accused him of sexual abuse.

(Other woes persist in the ten-county Milwaukee archdiocese, where attendance at mass has dropped from 40 percent to 27 percent in the past 15 years, according to the *New York Times*. A state judge ruled last year that the archdiocese's insurance company does not have to pay sexual-abuse claims in cases in which church officials are proven to have secretly transferred abusive priests. The archdiocese has put up for sale its 44-acre headquarters property alongside Lake Michigan.)

Prior to his stint in Milwaukee, Dolan was an auxiliary bishop for one year in his native St. Louis. As a seminarian, Dolan attended Rome's prestigious Pontifical North American College, where he later served as rector from 1994 to 2001.

As rector, Dolan met and befriended both up-and-comers and the cream of the American Catholic hierarchy, said John P. Wauck, professor of social communications at Rome's Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. "He's a solid, orthodox, John Paul II bishop, extremely affable and engaging," said Wauck. -*Religion News Service*