

Pope Francis makes 13 cardinals as he molds a future in his likeness

06/10/2019 21:01 by admin

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Vatican City: One was exiled to Siberia for anti-Soviet activities. One volunteered to replace one of the six Jesuits gunned down during El Salvador's civil war. One suffered a demotion in the post-9/11 era as a casualty of the Vatican's bungled Islam policy.

Pope Francis has chosen 13 men he admires and whose pastoral concerns align with his to become the Catholic Church's newest cardinals.

A formal ceremony elevating the prelates to the elite position in church hierarchy takes place Saturday.

They include 10 cardinals who are under age 80 and therefore eligible to vote in a conclave, increasing the likelihood that a future pope might end up looking an awful lot like the current one.

With Saturday's consistory, Francis will have named 52 per cent of the voting-age members of the College of Cardinals.

Many of the pastors receiving red hats at Saturday's consistory are from far-flung dioceses in the developing world that never have had a prince of the Catholic Church representing them.

That is by no means a coincidence. Francis, who is from Argentina, was elected as the first Latin American and first Jesuit pope in 2013.

He has consistently prioritised the peripheries and marginalised communities in his travels, pastoral concerns and appointments.

The pope's choices for cardinals continue to make the Catholic hierarchy more representative of the universal church, which is growing in the global south and shrinking in Europe and North America.

"Our church is lively, it's a joyful church of music and dance," Cristobal Lopez Romero, a Spaniard who serves as archbishop of Rabat, Morocco and is among the cardinals Francis is creating Saturday.

"It's a church where there are more young than old, more black than white."

The consistory comes at a fraught time in Francis's six-year papacy.

Opposition is mounting among conservative Catholics who disapprove of his focus on the environment, migrants and other issues that representing a turnaround from predecessor Pope Benedict XVI.

Francis has acknowledged criticism some in the US church but shown no sign right-wing outrage is hampering his agenda.

After he stacks the College of Cardinals with more like-minded men, he is set to open Sunday a three-week meeting on better ministering to the indigenous peoples of the Amazon region.

Right-wing groups have come out in force against the Amazon synod's environmental emphasis, saying it amounts to an attempt to create a new "pagan" religion.

A Canadian priest in Francis' latest group of cardinals, Michael Czerny, said he thinks the criticism is coming from a small fringe with vested interests in developing the Amazon and pursuing other priorities incompatible with the pope's vision.

He's meeting with some loud opposition. I don't think it's so much," Czerny, who Francis named to be one of his special secretaries at the synod, told The Associated Press.

I think it's loud."

Czerny is clearly a Francis favourite, someone in whom the pope sees a cardinal he can entrust the most important dossiers.

He has worked since 2010 in the Vatican's justice office, where he helped draft Francis' major environmental encyclical.

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A Jesuit like the pope, Czerny went to San Salvador in 1989 after six of their confreres were gunned down at Central American University.

For a South American Jesuit like Francis, the killings were an unfathomable assault that laid bare the order's social justice ethos, the same ethos that years later would inform his papacy.

Several other prelates with experience in another of Francis' agenda items "relations with Islam" are also receiving red hats, including the head of the Vatican's interfaith relations office, neo-Cardinal Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot, and Guixot's predecessor in that job, neo-Cardinal Michael Fitzgerald.

Long considered one of the church's leading experts on Islam, Fitzgerald was removed as president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 2006 and sent off to Egypt as the Vatican's ambassador.

His removal came a month before Benedict folded the interfaith relations office into the Vatican's culture ministry, in a move seen as reducing dialogue with Islam in a post-9/11 world.

The Vatican restored the office as its own entity the following year after Benedict enraged the Muslim world with a now-infamous speech equating Islam with violence. Only recently under Francis have Catholic-Muslim relations healed.

Many commentators have seen Francis' decision to make Fitzgerald a cardinal as a righting of a past wrong.

Fitzgerald, who is over 80 and unable to vote in a conclave, was diplomatic when asked about the significance of both him and his successor receiving red hats, saying it showed "continuity."

Another new cardinal over the voting age limit was a clear sentimental favourite for Francis: Lithuanian Cardinal-elect

Sigitas Tamkevicius, a Jesuit who was imprisoned and sent to labour camps for 10 years, some of them in Siberian exile, for his anti-Soviet activities.

Tamkevicius accompanied Francis last year on a visit to site of a KGB prison in Vilnius where he had been was held, one of the most moving moments of the pope's trip to Lithuania.

"In prison, there were difficult moments, very difficult moments, and the worst was when I was interrogated," Tamkevicius told journalists at the Vatican this week.

"The interrogation would last for months and months."

He said he was thankful to God "for all these years that I have had as priest, as bishop, as archbishop."

"I ask that he allows me to go on a lot longer so that I can face the challenges of today and always have the faith in my heart," Tamkevicius said.

- AP