

Pope names conservative Hispanic to succeed Cardinal Mahony in L.A. Opus Dei member Jose H. Gomez: Opus Dei member Jose H. Gomez

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“This an epic moment in the life of the church,” exuded Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, the most populous U.S. Catholic archdiocese. The prelate was speaking of his projected successor to lead 4.18 million Catholics in heavily Hispanic southern California.

Pope Benedict XVI on April 6 named Mexican-born Archbishop Jose H. Gomez of San Antonio, Texas, to replace Mahony, who will reach the retirement age of 75 in February and step down in 2011.

Gomez, who has served in San Antonio since 2004, would be in line to become the nation’s first Hispanic to wear a red hat inasmuch as Los Angeles has been headed by cardinals for a half century.

Hispanics—or Latinos, as some prefer—today make up more than 35 percent of all Catholics in the U.S. and more than 50 percent of those under age 25, according to the bishops conference. Yet only 9 percent of U.S. bishops are Hispanic.

Gomez, while keeping a relatively low profile in the American church, nevertheless has taken positions on controversial political issues that will contrast with Mahony’s approach.

Gomez has said that priests should inform Catholic politicians who support abortion rights that they should not present themselves for communion—a position contrary to that of Mahony, who has said such politicians should make that decision for themselves.

As the Catholic Church contends with a spreading international sexual abuse scandal, an advocate for abuse victims voiced disappointment April 7 at Gomez's appointment, charging that he had downplayed several cases of alleged abuse by members of religious orders in San Antonio.

"If the pope is trying to convince us he's tough on abuse," said Barbara Garcia Boehland of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), "he's shooting himself in the foot by elevating Gomez."

Gomez, 58, was born in Monterrey, Mexico, and studied theology in Spain. A member of the conservative Catholic movement Opus Dei, he moved to the U.S. in 1987 and worked in the archdiocese of Galveston-Houston until 2001. In January of that year he was named an auxiliary bishop of Denver, where he served until his appointment in San Antonio.

Both men downplayed Gomez's affiliation with Opus Dei and their respective reputations, with Mahony saying that "these labels of conservative and liberal are really unhelpful in the life of the church."

But unlike Mahony, Gomez was one of some 80 active and retired U.S. Catholic bishops—about one fifth of the total—who publicly protested President Obama's appearance last year as commencement speaker at the University of Notre Dame because of Obama's support for abortion rights. *-Religion News Service*