

In move to the right, bishops choose Dolan

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue

In a dramatic break with tradition, U.S. Catholic bishops elected New York archbishop Timothy Dolan as their next president, choosing a friendly but assertive leader over the more conciliatory front-runner.

Dolan

defeated Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Arizona, 128 to 111 in the third and final round of voting. Kicanas has been vice president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, traditionally a stepping stone to the presidency, since 2007, when he defeated Dolan by two votes.

The

election November 16 at the bishops' meeting in Baltimore marks the first time since the 1960s that a sitting vice president was on the presidential ballot and lost the election, according to church historians.

Noting also that two conservative candidates led the voting for vice president, observers said the election shows that the bishops' conference is moving sharply to the right—with consequences not only for Catholics but also for politicians who court a crucial swing vote.

"This is a signal that the Catholic bishops are going to be leaders in the culture wars," said Thomas Reese, an expert on the American Catholic Church and a senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University.

Archbishop Joseph

Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky, the bishops' point man on defending traditional marriage, won the race for vice president, defeating another outspoken conservative, Denver archbishop Charles Chaput, 147 to 91.

"This

is a sign that the bishops want to shake off the era of moderate liberalism, which didn't seem to confront any issue with passion or conviction," said Russell Shaw, a former spokesman for the bishops who was observing the assembly. "Dolan is a real leader, a man of conviction."

Dolan, who was named archbishop of New York last February, assumed the helm of the 300-member bishops' conference at the conclusion of the three-day meeting.

A bearish, ruddy backslapper, Dolan said he has not had time to ponder the significance of his surprise election—but proposed that the deciding factor may have been a difference in persona, not politics. "When you speak about the leadership of bishops, usually you're speaking about style," he said, noting that both he and Kicanas are orthodox advocates for Catholic doctrine.

Criticism of the soft-spoken Kicanas had been mounting in recent weeks as sexual abuse victims accused him of failing to stop the ordination of a priest who was later convicted of sexually abusing teen boys. Conservative Catholic bloggers labeled him weak on abortion, gay marriage and other social issues.

Chaput said he received a "huge number" of e-mails critical of Kicanas, especially his handling of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy. But both Chaput and Dolan said bishops typically dismiss such orchestrated campaigns.

"The bishops usually bristle if they feel any outside pressure," Dolan said. "We take our autonomy very seriously."

In a statement, Kicanas said, "I respect the wisdom of my brother bishops in choosing their new president and vice president" and praised Dolan's "great wit" and "jovial spirit." Privately, though, Kicanas is "disappointed," said a source close to the bishop.

In keeping with tradition, Dolan is expected to be named a cardinal, but not in a scheduled consistory at the Vatican since his predecessor, retired Cardinal Edward Egan, still holds a vote in a papal election until he turns 80 in 2012.

While Dolan's election puts a friendly face front and center at the bishops' conference, Dolan is known as a strong advocate for church teaching. Also he has become more of a culture warrior since moving to New York, taking on the *New York Times* in particular over its coverage of sexual abuse in the church. —RNS