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My Friend the Cardinal

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Some people at the University of Dayton are watching the selection of the new pope with special interest in Cardinal Peter Turkson, who visited campus last year, but no one on campus is watching it more closely than Dorothy Mensah-Aggrey.

"I am wavering and nervous," said Mensah-Aggrey, of the University's Institute for Pastoral Initiatives. "I know God's will will be done, but if he is elected, I won't be able to pick up the phone and call him."

Turkson has been her friend since 1982. She was a college student directing a 50-voice choir at the University of Cape Coast in their native Ghana and he was teaching in a nearby seminary. He heard her choir and asked her to work with the seminary choir on sacred music.

Turkson became her mentor and a family friend who has played an important pastoral role in good times and in bad. He was the celebrant at her wedding and treated her parents to lunch during their 50th wedding anniversary in 2006. When her marriage hit troubled waters, he was there for her and her two children during what she says was a very tough time.

Although his selection as cardinal in 2003 was cause for a national celebration in Ghana, Mensah-Aggrey said Turkson has remained unassuming and accessible.

"Despite his knowledge and deep spirituality, he's very, very humble," she said. "He's very down-to-earth and jovial. He makes me laugh."

She last saw him when he visited Washington, D.C., early last year before she started work at the institute as coordinator for curriculum design and adult catechesis. She knows that accessibility would change if he were to be elected as pope.

But that's fine with her, because, "It's all in God's hands."

Brother Ray Fitz, S.M., who helped organize the conference for Catholic business schools on campus that Turkson addressed in June, 2012, also described Turkson as thoughtful, down-to-earth and easy to talk to. "There were no airs about him at all," Fitz said.

Perhaps more important for Fitz, the University's Ferree Professor of Social Justice, Turkson demonstrated a deep knowledge of Catholic social teaching and respect for the power of bringing people together.

"He knows how to engage people in dialogue," Fitz said. "I would love to see a pope who encourages dialogue and is good at it."

In addition to delivering the keynote address of the International Conference on Catholic Social Thought, Turkson celebrated Mass in the University's Immaculate Conception Chapel. And Fitz said Turkson earned a unique distinction during his visit to Dayton, when community leader Mervyn Alphonso whisked him away during a conference break.

"He's probably the only person ever considered for pope who has visited the Dayton Art Institute," he said.

Sister Angela Ann Zukowski, M.H.S.H., director of the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives, also met Turkson while he was at the University.

"He's very well grounded and has a good sense of the problems facing the church and the world and he has the ability to address those in a prophetic, visionary way," she said. "He can read the signs of the times."

She pointed to the centerpiece of the conference, "Vocation of the Business Leader," a guide for Catholic business leaders.
published by the Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice under Turkson’s leadership as president of the council.

"That document reflected what he believes about society and business," she said. "The church needs to rethink a new business plan for the 21st century instead of a model that comes from the 16th and 17th centuries," she said.

Zukowski said she saw in Turkson a remarkable spirituality and deep love for the church.

"I think he brings some very profound gifts — dialogue, solidarity, bridge-building," she said. "He’s an intellectual of the church and he can speak to the layman.

"He would be my first choice, but the Holy Spirit is going to do what the Holy Spirit will do."

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