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Papabile of the Day: The Men Who Could Be Pope

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John Allen is offering a profile each day of one of the most frequently touted papabili, or men who could be pope. The old saying in Rome is that he who enters a conclave as pope exits as a cardinal, meaning there's no guarantee one of these men actually will be chosen. They are, however, the leading names drawing buzz in Rome these days, ensuring they will be in the spotlight as the conclave draws near. The profiles of these men also suggest the issues and the qualities other cardinals see as desirable heading into the election.

Although the election of a pope is in many ways a carefully scripted process, the closest thing to a wild card this time around may well be 68-year-old Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna.

Depending on who's doing the handicapping, the erudite Dominican is either an obvious, slam-dunk contender or somebody who's basically taken himself out of the running.

Schönborn certainly has the right pedigree for the job. A member of the ancient Austrian noble family of Schönborn-Buchheim-Wolfstahl, he's one of two cardinals and 19 archbishops, bishops, priests and religious sisters his family has produced. He's not even the first Schönborn to be the primate of the Austrian church; that honor fell to his great-great uncle, Cardinal Franz Graf Schönborn, who led the Austrian episcopacy under the old Austro-Hungarian empire from his position as the archbishop of Prague. (He had previously been the bishop of Budweis -- hence he was, believe it or not, a "Budweiser.")

Schönborn studied theology under then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger in Regensburg, Germany, in the 1970s, and later taught at the prestigious Swiss University of Friborg. He served as general editor of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

In Vienna, he won high marks early on for steadying a church that had been rocked by a sexual abuse scandal involving his predecessor. As time went on, however, Schönborn's image became more mixed. He was involved in an ugly clash with the demagogic Bishop Kurt Krenn of Sankt Pölten, and many people preferred Krenn's blunt talk to Schönborn's shifting and evasive comments. Schönborn then carried out a purge of his staff, in one case informing his popular vicar general that he had been fired by leaving a note on his doorstep.

More recently, Schönborn has watched as hundreds of his own priests have gone into open rebellion, issuing a "call to disobedience" over issues such as celibacy and the role of women in the church. (The movement is actually led by the former vicar.) While Schönborn hasn't exactly welcomed the uprising, he hasn't shut down lines of conversation either, which some see as admirable pastoral sensitivity, and others as cowardice.

Two years ago, many people were ready to write an obituary for Schönborn's papal prospects after a highly public spat with Italian Cardinal Angelo Sodano, a former Secretary of State and still the dean of the College of Cardinals.

As a series of clerical abuse scandals exploded across Europe, which among other things cast a critical spotlight on Benedict XVI's personal record, Sodano created a sensation by calling that criticism "petty gossip" during the Vatican's Easter Mass.

In a session with Austrian journalists not long afterward, Schönborn not only said Sodano had "deeply wronged" abuse victims, but he also charged that Sodano had blocked an investigation of Schönborn's predecessor, Cardinal Hans Hermann Gröer, who had been accused of molesting seminarians and monks and who resigned in 1995. Schönborn reportedly said that then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wanted to take action, but he lost an internal argument to Sodano.

Schönborn apparently thought that session was off the record, but the content leaked out anyway.

Schönborn was swiftly summoned for a one-on-one with Benedict, and afterward, both Sodano and Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the current Secretary of State, joined the conversation. When it was over, the Vatican issued a statement widely seen as a rebuke to Schönborn -- among other things, pointedly reminding him that it's not up to him to pass judgment on a fellow cardinal.

Now, however, Schönborn's willingness to break ranks and speak out in favor of reform on the abuse crisis may actually make him more attractive rather than less.

Schönborn also helped himself during last fall's Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization, when most participants ranked him as one of the two or three most impressive figures. People especially liked his suggestion that synod should be less about giving lofty speeches, and more about bishops sharing their practical problems.

The case for Schönborn is easy to make.

First up is raw intellectual chops. Schönborn is a polyglot, comfortable discussing complex points in multiple languages, and a genuine scholar in his own right. During last fall's synod, I asked another cardinal why people seemed drawn to Schönborn, and his answer was simple: "Intelligence attracts."

Second, Schönborn is an intellectual protégé of Benedict XVI, so much so that over the years he's almost been seen as the pope's "beloved son," but he also has keenly pastoral side and a capacity for nuance.

For instance, Schönborn has dropped hints that he'd be open to considering the case for married clergy, and given his patient reaction to the priests' uprising in Austria, it's unlikely that his first response as pope to any form of disagreement would be to crack heads.

Third, having faced the tumult in Austria, one could make a good argument that no senior official in Catholicism has a better feel for the demands of crisis management than Schönborn. Especially at a time when the Vatican is once again engulfed in crisis, that may be a very attractive feature of his résumé for other cardinals.

Fourth, Schönborn was an apostle of what's now known as the new evangelization, meaning the effort to relight the missionary fires of the faith in the heart of the secularized West, well before there was even a word for it. He's written widely on the subject, and at the pastoral grassroots he's encouraged the growth of a variety of spiritual and missionary movements in Austria, many of them appealing in a special way to youth.

Fifth, Schönborn has a high comfort level with the media and is used to playing on a big stage, certainly a plus for anyone who might occupy the world's most visible, and demanding, position of religious leadership.

The case against Schönborn, however, also has some fairly compelling elements.

For one thing, some cardinals may look at the fractious situation in Austrian Catholicism and say to themselves: "This guy has had 18 years to get the situation under control, and it hasn't happened. What reason do we have to believe he'd fare any better as pope?"

Whether that's a fair assessment or not, it's likely to weigh on some cardinals' minds.

Second, Schönborn's tiff with Sodano may help him in terms of public opinion, but it could still be a liability in the College of Cardinals. Not only is Sodano still the dean of the college and an influential figure, but other cardinals may wonder if Schönborn might be inclined to toss them under the bus if the stars aligned that way.

Third, Schönborn is certainly a well-known figure in Vatican circles, but he's never actually worked inside the system in Rome. For cardinals seeking someone who can push through a serious reform of the bureaucracy, that may be a question mark.

Fourth, despite Schönborn's considerable savvy, he occasionally has a penchant for saying or doing things that strike some people as ill-advised.

In 2001, for instance, Schönborn intervened on behalf of American Fr. Joseph Fessio in an effort to have Fessio's Ignatius Institute at the University of San Francisco granted a measure of autonomy by the Vatican, rendering it immune to the normal authority of the university's president.

That effort not only irritated the university's Jesuit administration, but also then-Archbishop William Levada of San Francisco, who was involved in negotiations to resolve the dispute. It also irked the Vatican's top education official, who saw it as an end-run around his own authority.

More recently, Schönborn has made public statements critical of the theory of evolution and appearing to endorse the "intelligent design" school, which critics see as creationism under another name. After an explosive *New York Times* opinion piece on the subject in 2005, Schönborn has been forced several times to clarify his views. (The thrust is that he's not opposed to evolution as a scientific theory, but gets off the train when it's lifted into a philosophical position that excludes God.)

Some cardinals may wonder if a prelate with a record of stirring the waters and then trying to back-peddle is what the Vatican needs right now.

Fifth, Schönborn would mark the second German-speaking pope in a row, and some cardinal may think it would be better to find someone from a different part of the world.

Given the widely varying reactions Schönborn tends to provoke, it's especially difficult to assess his chances for the papacy. In the post-Feb. 11 world, however, in which Benedict XVI has already done the previously unthinkable by resigning, it pays not to be overly dogmatic about anything -- including Schönborn's odds in the looming conclave.

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