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The real winner of the 2013 conclave: St. Francis of Assisi

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 15, 2013 All Things Catholic
Pope Francis

Although 76-year-old Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires was the one who stepped out onto the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square clad in white Wednesday night, there's a good argument that the real winner of the 2013 conclave wasn't in Rome, and wasn't even alive to see the result.

In effect, the landslide winner was actually St. Francis of Assisi.

The case for the 2013 papal election as a tribute to the most iconic saint in Catholic tradition rests on three points.

The O'Malley boom

The biggest surprise of the pre-conclave period was the emergence of Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston as a crowd favorite. As I said during CNN's broadcast of the Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, if the custom of papal election by popular acclamation were still around, it's entirely possible O'Malley might be the one sitting on the Throne of Peter.

O'Malley was the runaway winner of an online poll for the next pope sponsored by the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, reflecting popular sentiment in Italy. In the week prior to the opening of the conclave, I couldn't get into a cab, walk into a restaurant or return to my hotel without some Italian volunteering the opinion that the 68-year-old Capuchin with the brown habit and the beard would be a great choice.

As that buzz began to build, most media commentators assumed it was based on O'Malley's profile as a reformer on the church's clerical abuse scandals. When you asked typical Italians, however, that's not usually where they began. The first thing they would usually say is O'Malley is a Franciscan and therefore a "man of the people."

Franciscans are rock stars in Italy and always have been. In the popular imagination, they're the polar opposite of stereotypes of princes of the church hungry for wealth, power and control. Franciscans are perceived as simple, humble men, able both by word and deed to connect with the hopes and dreams of ordinary folks.

The O'Malley boom illustrated that what the Catholic "street" wanted was a new Francis, a pope to bring his love affair with "Lady Poverty" to the church's highest office.

(Some observers suggested O'Malley became a sensation because he reminded people of Padre Pio, the famed Capuchin visionary and stigmatic. Padre Pio certainly packs a punch in the culture, but he's beloved because he incarnated the spirit of Francis of Assisi.)

The choice of name

When Bergoglio was announced, commentators immediately seized on several surprising aspects of the result:

- He had not been identified as one of the leading candidates heading into the conclave.
- He's the first pope from outside Europe in at least 1,000 years, depending on how one defines "Europe."
- He's the first pope from Latin America.
- He's the first Jesuit pope.

Those are all noteworthy points, but the most arresting thing about the new pope is his decision to take the name of Francis in honor of the great patron of the earth, of simplicity and of the poor.

In itself, the selection of Bergoglio rates as surprising but not stunning. He wasn't on anybody's "A list" of papal candidates, and cardinals themselves have said they didn't go into the conclave thinking he was the clear choice. Yet he was there in the background, lurking on most B and C lists, especially since he drew strong support back in 2005.

(As a footnote, *Time* magazine touted me in a March 14 piece [1] as "the man who picked the pope" because I published a profile of Bergoglio in my "Papabile of the Day" series [2] March 3. In truth, I profiled more than 20 contenders and styled Bergoglio [3] as a definite fallback possibility. I had him on the list, but not at the top.)

It wasn't much of a surprise that the cardinals turned to a non-European and a Latin American, since many of them had said out loud that's what they wanted. As for picking a Jesuit, there have been other popes from religious orders, and sooner or later, it was bound to fall on the Society of Jesus.

The name, however, was a stunner.

No matter how long his papacy lasts, the new pontiff's very first decision will probably rate as among his boldest. Over the years, I've talked to historians of the papacy who regarded "Francis" as a name no pope could, or should, ever take. It's like "Jesus" or "Peter," they argued -- there's only one, so it would be borderline sacrilegious for a pope to claim it for himself.

On TV, I tried to explain what the name "Francis" conjures up in the Catholic imagination. For most Catholics, I said, there are two faces of the church. There's the institutional church, with its rules and dogma, its wealth and power, its hierarchical chain of command. Then there's the church of the spirit, a humble and simple community of equals with a special love for the least of this world. Ideally, the two go together, but in any case, they're distinct.

By taking the name "Francis," the pope effectively said the spirit of that second face of the church needs to shine through anew in the first.

Already, the new pope has sent small but unmistakable signals that simplicity and humility will be hallmarks of his reign: asking the crowd in the square to bless him before he blessed them; dropping by his Roman hotel to pay his bill; taking the bus with the cardinals as they left the Casa Santa Marta rather than the usual papal limousine. His first act after donning his papal vestments and returning to the Sistine Chapel wasn't to plant himself on the papal throne, but to walk over to 76-year-old Cardinal Anthony Okogie of Nigeria, who entered the conclave in a wheelchair, and give him a special greeting.

What has made this pope an early hit, in other words, is the sense that Francis is more than a name, but rather a statement about the kind of pope he wants to be.

(There was some early confusion about whether the pope meant to honor Francis of Assisi or St. Francis Xavier,

the great Jesuit missionary. The cardinals later explained that when Bergoglio announced his name inside the Sistine Chapel, he added that he did so in honor of Francis of Assisi.)

A mandate for reform

Heading into the conclave, an anti-establishment mood was clear among many of the cardinals who were preparing to elect a successor to Benedict XVI. The diagnosis was that Benedict's support team had dropped the ball over the last eight years in terms of business management and the cardinals were looking to shake things up.

In part, that voter discontent expressed itself as a strong bias against any Italian candidate. One cardinal told me on background that in a different conclave, Angelo Scola of Milan might well have been elected pope, but in this atmosphere, no Italian was going to get 77 votes.

(As a humorous aside, the Italian bishops' conference accidentally sent out an email moments after the "*Habemus papam*" announcement congratulating Scola. The gaffe will go down as their "Dewey Defeats Truman" moment.)

Over and over, cardinals said they wanted a serious reform of the Roman Curia, pushing it toward greater transparency, accountability and efficiency.

At the same time, they knew they weren't just hiring a CEO. Better business management in the church is important, but somehow it must be grounded in the Gospels. That's the sense in which St. Francis was a great reformer, the one whom God asked to "rebuild his church," and reform in this Franciscan sense is what the cardinals seem to be hoping "Papa Bergoglio" can deliver.

Henri De Lubac once wrote that the difference between St. Francis and Martin Luther is the difference between a reform aimed at holiness and a reform aimed at criticism. In choosing Bergoglio, the cardinals seem to have opted for the former.

Whether the new pope can pull it off is anyone's guess. The cardinals thought they were voting for reform eight years ago when they elected Joseph Ratzinger, a man who was in the Roman Curia but not of it. It didn't play out that way, and now the cardinals have turned to another pope well into his 70s, this time a true outsider.

The former pope embraced Benedict as his patron, signifying a scholarly and quasi-monastic style. This pope has chosen Francis, suggesting an earthier and more popular way of living the faith, one that emphasizes closeness to the poor. Both Benedict and Francis were great reformers, but the approach is different.

Francis in the streets, Francis in the new pope's name, and Francis in the mandate the pope has been issued. All in all, not a bad month for the "little poor man" of Assisi. Now the spotlight shines on the pope who carries his name and all the expectations it arouses.

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