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Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline of Marseille, France, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops on synodality at the Vatican Oct. 23, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Could the pope of the peripheries be succeeded by a cardinal from a French port city known as a place of refuge for people on the margins?

Marseille's Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline is not widely considered a top-tier contender among the candidates being discussed as cardinals approach the May 7 conclave. But his experience and background mean he is still worth taking seriously.

Aveline, 66, could be especially of interest for those cardinal electors looking for a candidate who prioritizes the late pope's external focus on social justice and his internal commitment to synodality, the ongoing church reform project aimed at making the Catholic Church more welcoming and inclusive.

Born in French Algeria in 1958, Aveline moved with his family to the Mediterranean port city of Marseille when he was a young boy, where his father worked for France's national railroad company. As a child, he thought he might want to be a teacher, but soon felt a vocation to the Catholic priesthood.

From 1977 to 1979, he underwent seminary studies in Avignon, France, before eventually continuing them in Paris. (He would also later earn a doctorate in theology.) After being ordained a priest in 1984, much of his early church career was as a pastor in Marseille's working class and ethnically diverse neighborhoods, in a city that serves as a crossroads between Europe and North Africa.

Within the Marseille Archdiocese, he has worn a number of hats: theology professor, seminary director of studies, and vicar general. In 2013, Francis made him an auxiliary bishop before naming him archbishop in 2019.

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Ever since Francis made him a cardinal in 2022, Aveline's name has often reverberated around the Vatican as a potential successor to the man who gave him

his red hat.

For starters, there's his physical appearance. He is rotund — and often seen with a big smile and hearty laugh — leading many in the French and Italian press to make comparisons to Pope John XXIII and already dub him Pope John XXIV.

Although he is an outsider, already over the last three years he has become a regular presence in Rome, traveling here almost twice a month for meetings with key Vatican offices where he is a member. Most notably, he is a member of the Dicastery for Bishops, which is responsible for identifying bishops around the world, and a member of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue.

During the 2023 and 2024 Vatican meetings for the synod on synodality, he was one of Francis' personal invitees at both sessions, where Catholics met for two monthlong assemblies on the future of the church.

At the synod, Aveline was a member of the drafting committee for the synod's final document. He was also elected at the end of the 2024 assembly by his fellow European bishops as a member of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops' Ordinary Council, which is responsible for organizing future synods.

His quick ascendancy within the Vatican in such a short time has provided a baptism-by-fire training of the inner workings of its complicated bureaucracy, though he is hardly seen as an insider by those who seek to run the place. But Francis' own affection for Aveline provided him critical backing to get things done on the inside.



Pope Francis shares a smile with Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline during a Marian prayer service with diocesan clergy at the Basilica Notre-Dame de la Garde in Marseille, France, Sept. 22, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

To top it all off, Aveline managed to persuade Francis to travel to Marseille to headline a migration conference in 2023, despite the late pope's desire to avoid trips to major Western European nations.

Like Francis, the port city cardinal is known for being a strong defender of migrants and the need for greater interreligious dialogue, though he's also denounced the widespread violent crime in the city and spoken of the need to have a nuanced debate about immigration.

While not being afraid to use his voice when he needs to do so, he has managed to steer clear of wading into hot-button theological debates inside the church on women or LGBTQ questions.

His affable personality and strong communication skills have earned him high praise from those who have worked alongside him — though his lack of fluency in Italian (or other languages other than Arabic) has limited his ability to develop that network.

As the countdown to the conclave continues, those trying to bring together the various pieces of a candidate known for his pastoral style, but tempered by his caution when it comes to contentious issues, might start to take a more serious look at Aveline. But at this stage, his stock will have to rise much more quickly for it to produce white smoke.

This is part of a series on the leading candidates in the 2025 papal election. The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

This story appears in the **Papal front-runners: The men who could be pope** and **Who will be the next pope?** feature series.