Vatican
Vatican News
Lopez Romero

Cardinal Cristóbal López Romero of Rabat, Morocco, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 17, 2023. The name of the 72-year-old Spanish cardinal who serves in Morocco is appearing on the lists of those who could succeed Pope Francis. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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In the Hollywood blockbuster film "Conclave," Stanley Tucci's fictional Cardinal Bellini declares that "no sane man would want the papacy."

There's at least one potential candidate for the job — a dark horse though he may be — that is currently letting it be known he shares a similar sentiment.

"I don't like my name appearing on the papal candidate lists," Cardinal Cristóbal López Romero recently told Argentina's La Nacion.

And yet the 72-year-old Spanish cardinal who serves in Morocco is on the lists. López Romero is being quietly discussed in some corners as someone who could translate his own personal biography of bridge-building cultures and continents into a

compelling contender for the church's top job.

Born in Andalusia in 1952, López Romero was just a teenager when he joined the Salesian seminary, a missionary order with particular concern for the poor and the education of young priests. After his ordination to the priesthood in 1979, López Romero took up pastoral assignments in both Europe and Latin America.

Pope Francis and then Cardinal-designate Lopez Romero

Pope Francis delivers his Angelus blessing in the presence of children as he meets with priests, religious men and women and the ecumenical Council of Churches at the cathedral in Rabat, Morocco, March 31, 2019. At left is then Cardinal-designate Cristobal Lopez Romero of Rabat, a member of the Salesian men's order. (CNS/Paul Haring)

From working in Barcelona's impoverished La Verneda neighborhood to ministering in the missions of Paraguay, López Romero's biography is similar to the "street priests" Pope Francis so often praised for always having the "smell of the sheep."

López Romero later went on to assume a number of leadership positions within his Salesian Order, including serving as provincial for communities in Paraguay, Bolivia and Spain.

In 2003, the missionary priest took on a new assignment in Morocco, serving as the director of the Salesians' pastoral care center in a country where Catholics number around 25,000 — or less than 1% of the population.

Morocco proved a far cry from the Catholic strongholds of Spain and Latin America, but López Romero settled in well and found a young and vibrant church there that energized him.

In 2017, Francis named him the archbishop of Rabat and a year later, the pontiff visited the country himself on one of his critical visits to make overtures to the Islamic world. Impressed by the way López Romero had worked to bridge Muslim and Christian divides, the pope made him a cardinal the following year.

In Rome, López Romero keeps a low profile. He is a member of the Vatican's Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue and participated in the 2023 and 2024 synod on synodality.

But the cardinal doesn't seem to mind his outsider status, be it within the Roman Curia or at home.

Asked about his work in Morocco, he once noted: "I hear confession barely once every six months." It was a nod to the tiny Christian community there. "That helped me realize I wasn't there to serve the church but rather, as the church, to serve the world — in this case, the Muslim world."

But despite not being a church insider, his background with leadership roles on three continents — Africa, Europe and Latin America — means he is not an unknown figure among his brother cardinals.

During the early days of the pre-conclave meetings, the outcome of the papal election appears to be unpredictable, with the race wide open. Nearly a week into general congregations, López Romero has appeared on more lists of *papabile*, the Italian phrase for possible popes, because he is impressing observers with his relaxed style, humor and his conciliatory tone.

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He is a strong backer of Francis' push for the church to become more synodal, reforming its structures to become more welcoming, inclusive and participatory. But he has also said it cannot be forced, and that the faithful have to be helped along the way.

Synodality, he said, "doesn't divide, but there are different positions, and we'll have to work so everyone understands what synodality means."

López Romero also seems to be calling for a new pope who embraces the mission of Francis while recognizing that some in the church were rankled by the late pontiff's unorthodox, outspoken style. The next pope, López Romero added, doesn't necessarily have to be a Francis II or a Francis impersonator.

"I am happy for him to be a good impersonator of Christ, a good Christian, a good person, and someone who pays attention to what happens in the world," he said.

Given his own personal story, priorities and disposition, many in Rome are asking if the Spanish cardinal in Morocco might be that man.

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