Opinion
NCR Voices
Cardinal Raymond Burke

U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke, center, processes out at the conclusion of the Mass on the fifth day of the "novendiali," nine days of mourning for Pope Francis, in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican April 30, 2025. The National Catholic Register has included Burke on its list of top 10 contenders as the new pope. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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It is a rule of Catholic journalism that rumors abound in the weeks and months before a major episcopal appointment is announced, say, a new archbishop for New York. Once the rumors dry up, you know the appointment is imminent, that the decision has gone to the pope, he will make his choice and no one knows what that choice will be.

This afternoon (May 7), the cardinals will enter the Sistine Chapel to begin deciding the most important episcopal appointment on the planet, the selection of a new bishop of Rome. The rumors have dried up. Everything outside the chapel is, now, pure conjecture and everything inside is up to the cardinals and the Holy Spirit.

Another rule of Catholic journalism is to avoid finding yourself inside an information silo, listening only to people who agree with you, lacking sources among those with whom you do not see eye to eye. Alas, for some more conservative Catholic outlets, the silo is both obvious and total.

> A (Cardinal Raymond) Burke candidacy is imaginable only if you have drunk large quantities of archconservative Kool-Aid.
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In his final list of 10 "papal contenders," Edward Pentin at the National Catholic Register includes Cardinal Raymond Burke. "His chances of being elected pope are considered slim given that many cardinals have been chosen by Pope Francis and share the late pope's views, and because a cardinal from a superpower is usually not considered," Pentin writes. "However, he is included here because so many practicing faithful often say they would like him as pope even if they are aware his election is improbable."

That is not analysis; it is fantasy. I will bet my house that Cardinal Burke will not emerge on the balcony of St. Peter's as the next pope. His fetish for dressing up in high Renaissance clerical garb, with acres of watered silk encompassing him as he processes into a Tridentine rite liturgy is the stuff of tragicomedy. Burke is not, as Pentin states, "one of the Church's foremost canon lawyers." His interpretation of Canon 915 as justifying the denial of Communion to pro-choice politicians has been routinely rejected by the U.S. hierarchy and by Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. In short, a Burke candidacy is imaginable only if you have drunk large quantities of archconservative Kool-Aid.

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Pentin was the co-author of the "College of Cardinals Report," which examines the record of some 40 cardinals. It is being distributed free of charge, and in print format, to any cardinal who wants it. Cardinals can bring printed matter into the conclave, but will not have access to the internet or any outside communication.

When the "report" was made available online in December, I noted that the "report would be funny if it were not so tendentious. The list of papabili doesn't just tilt to

the right. It falls off the cliff." It earned Pentin and co-author Diane Montagna a spot on my Christmas naughty list.

The advocacy group Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, held a news conference to demand investigations into the records of several cardinals considered candidates for the papacy. They admitted, "We're not saying that these individuals are guilty," but that they had enough evidence to warrant an investigation.

The Philippines' bishops' conference came to the defense of Cardinal Luis Tagle after a different advocacy group, Bishop Accountability.org, faulted him for not posting the guidelines for monitoring clergy sex abuse on the website of the Philippines bishops' conference. As the conference noted, "since his appointment to a full-time position in the Roman Curia, Cardinal Tagle no longer holds direct authority over any diocese in the Philippines." That was in 2019.

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Context is everything. Throwing out names without a great deal of evidence to back up on accusation, on the eve of a conclave, is a smear tactic. Every case of clergy sex abuse is a crime and a sin. Every case. The victims have the right to compensation, pastoral aid and assistance for psychological treatment. They are entitled to be angry with the church for the rest of their lives. They are not entitled to dictate the conclave's choice by hurling mud. At a moment such as this, unless they have a smoking gun, they should let the cardinals do their work.

Today, that work will begin. No one really knows who is the front-runner nor how many votes they will get, even though there are speculations in various media about both the candidates and their expected vote totals. I just hope all the cardinals can block out the politically motivated agendas of those outside the Sistine Chapel, listen to the Holy Spirit and vote in good conscience for the man they think should be pope.

This story appears in the **Who will be the next pope?** feature series. View the full series.