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Australia's Pell tops the chart as a rumor magnet

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NCR Today

Rome, like other company towns, is an incubator for gossip. In Los Angeles, the talk is usually about who's taking over what studio; in Washington, it's who's in line for what cabinet job; and in the Eternal City, it's who's up and down for senior positions in the Roman Curia.

This is an especially fertile period for such rumors, because sometime in 2010 several important nominations in the Vatican will likely come down the pike. At the moment, the list of heads of offices past 75 and awaiting successors includes: Cardinals Giovanni Battista Re, Congregation for Bishops; Franc Rodé, Congregation for Religious; Claudio Hummes, Congregation for Clergy; Walter Kasper, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity; and Paul Cordes, *Cor Unum*. The pope's right-hand man, Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, is also past 75, though many insiders expect Bertone to stick around.

Over a leisurely Roman lunch on Saturday, one longtime Vatican watcher (for the record, a Pole) asked my reaction to speculation that Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, Australia, is under consideration to succeed Re at the Congregation for Bishops. That rumor first surfaced in January in the daily *Italia Oggi* — though, for what it's worth, the paper hypothesized that the current apostolic nuncio in Italy, Archbishop Giuseppe Bertello, is in "pole position" for the job, and that Pell might wind up at the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (the old "Propaganda Fidei").

To be perfectly honest, I have no idea whether Pell is indeed in line to take over the Congregation for Bishops or any other Vatican post. (At a threshold level, it doesn't make a great deal of sense, given that Pell isn't even currently a member of the congregation — but stranger things have happened.)

What I can say with some certainty is that Pell is perhaps the best living example of a certain species of ecclesiastical life that we might designate as the "rumor magnet."

Now 68, Pell took over in Sydney in 2001 and was named a cardinal in 2003. Since that time, he has been prominently mentioned as a candidate for virtually every important Vatican post that has come open, including the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (a job which actually went to then-Archbishop, now Cardinal, William Levada of the United States). Bookmaker Paddy Power even listed Pell as a 16-1 shot to take over the Archdiocese of Westminster in 2008, apparently on the strength of the fact that Pell, who of course is not British, had once studied at Oxford.

If Pell had actually received all the Roman jobs for which he's been prominently mentioned, by now he would virtually be running the Vatican all by himself.

While Pell may be at the top of the charts as a rumor magnet, he's hardly the only example of the species. In fact, most countries with a significant Catholic population and an active press culture have at least one guy who's always mentioned whenever an important Roman post looms. Other examples of perennial rumor magnets include:

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria

Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Quebec in Canada

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago (though since George took over as president of the U.S. bishops conference, and as he has aged, some of the speculation has died down)

Archbishop Reinhard Marx of Munich

Cardinal Pedro Scherer of São Paulo, Brazil

Though different in many ways, these rumor magnets share four defining characteristics:

They have Roman experience, making it reasonable to think that they might one day head a Vatican office.

They're perceived as enjoying a close relationship with the current pope.

They take strong positions on controversial issues, giving one camp in their local church a strong desire to see them promoted and another camp a strong desire to see them move on.

They have a high media profile, so they're well known both inside the church and in the broader society.

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While there may actually be solid logic for thinking these figures are serious candidates to end up in the Vatican, that's hardly the only reason they constantly attract media interest when important jobs come open. Precisely because of their high profile and their "love 'em or hate 'em" reputation, they are always, in the language of the news business, "good copy." In other words, linking them to some prominent Roman assignment — however tenuous the rumors may be in any given case — is guaranteed to attract an audience.

Among other things, all this provides another layer of interest to the likely cavalcade of Vatican appointments in 2010. That is, it will be fascinating to watch not merely who gets the jobs, but who emerges as a new focus of fevered speculation for every post that opens up.

Even if the rumor magnets don't wind up in a Roman post, they have already succeeded in one sense: They've engaged the public imagination more than virtually any prelate who actually has occupied a senior Vatican assignment. That, in itself, is a kind of accomplishment ? and by that measure, Cardinal George Pell is virtually in a class by himself.

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