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Three Possible Popes

by John L. Allen Jr.

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ROME -- There's no indication whatsoever of any health crisis around Pope Benedict XVI, and every reason to believe he's capable of leading the Catholic church for some time to come. Nevertheless, the May 1 beatification of John Paul II brought a host of media agencies to Rome anxious to update their briefing books for an eventual conclave, which meant that speculation about possible successors has been in the air.

Predicting the next pope is a notoriously hazardous enterprise; the trash heaps of history, in fact, are littered with the carcasses of alleged experts who have tried and failed. Take the following, therefore, with a grain of salt ? as a thought exercise, rather than a forecast.

At the moment, the consensus view in Rome is that whenever the cardinals next gather to elect a pope, they'll be looking for somebody who can do two things at once.

First, they'll want a candidate who can extend the intellectual legacy of Benedict's papacy, especially his effort to reposition Christianity as a "creative minority" in a secular world ? in fruitful dialogue, yet clear about its own identity. Second, they'll want someone who can remedy a perceived deficit of governance under the current papacy, often associated with the Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone.

Taken together, that would seem to suggest a candidate who broadly shares Benedict's theological and cultural outlook, coupled with a record as a capable administrator who's more inclined to take the reins personally in hand. Whether someone who perfectly fits that bill can actually be found, of course, is another question.

Without any pretense of trying to predict the outcome, the following three figures are at least among the most commonly cited possibilities.

Cardinal Marc Ouellet, 66, Canadian

Ouellet is currently the Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, a powerful position which should burnish his credentials as someone who could take control of the machinery of the Vatican. A veteran seminary professor and theologian, he's a Ratzingerian intellectually, coming out of the same Communio school as the pontiff himself.

A Sulpician priest, Ouellet spent ten years on missionary assignment in Colombia, so he knows something of Catholic realities outside Europe and North America. He's fluent in French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, German and Italian, so he also has the linguistic skills to lead a world church.

Born in northern Quebec, Ouellet served in 2001-2002 as Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity. From 2003 to 2010 he was the Archbishop of Quebec and thus primate of Canada, meaning he has a track record in leading the church in a difficult and highly secular environment.

Ouellet's profile in Quebec was as a staunch defender of orthodoxy, but also someone capable of surprises. In 2007, he apologized for past errors of the church, including "anti-Semitism, racism, indifference to First Nations and discrimination against women and homosexuals."

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Though some victims' groups have criticized Ouellet's record on the sexual abuse crisis, he's not found himself at the center of serious controversy on that front. As a footnote, however, Ouellet's brother Paul, a layman, pled guilty in 2009 to two counts of sexual assault against two minors.

Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, 68, Italian

President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, Ravasi is someone I've described as having "the mind of Ratzinger and the heart of Roncalli" — meaning the intellectual chops of Benedict XVI, coupled with the optimism and opening to the world of John XXIII.

A Biblical scholar, he served from 1989 to 2007 as prefect of the Ambrosian Library in Milan, where he worked with Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini — although Ravasi was seen as slightly more conservative than Martini, a hero to the church's progressive wing.

Ironically, rumors in Italy suggest Ravasi was set to become the bishop of Assisi in 2005, but was blocked because of allegedly heterodox views on Easter. Benedict XVI effectively resolved those doubts by giving him a major Vatican post, and by making him a cardinal.

Ravasi is widely read, in part because he only sleeps about four hours every night. He peppers his talks with literary allusions, ranging from church fathers to Nietzsche, Newton and Lev-Strauss.

He's made a special point of outreach to science. In 2009, he hosted a conference on evolution despite what he calls the "terror" of some in the Vatican, who felt it might open doors better left closed. (Ravasi said in a late 2010 interview with NCR that Benedict XVI "backed me completely" on the project.)

In March, Ravasi hosted a dialogue in Paris between believers and non-believers, involving the Sorbonne, UNESCO, and the *Academie Francaise*. It was called "The Courtyard of the Gentiles," referring to a space in the ancient temple in Jerusalem open to everyone.

tOne reservation about Ravasi is that he has no experience as the administrator of a major diocese. Some rumors have him pegged to succeed Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi in Milan, who's already 77. Were that to happen, it could further enhance Ravasi's prospects.

Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, 67, Argentinian

tCurrently the Prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, Sandri is a consummate Vatican insider who would likely be at the top of many lists if the most serious perceived need at the time is a set of 'safe hands' who can govern the church effectively.

tBorn in Argentina in 1943, Sandri comes from a family of Italian immigrants hailing from Trentino. He entered Vatican service after graduating from the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, Rome's prestigious school for Vatican diplomats. Over the course of his career, he served in Mauritius, Madagascar, the United States, Venezuela, and briefly in Mexico.

tIn 2000, Sandri was appointed 'substitute' in the Secretariat of State, essentially the third most powerful position in the Vatican, with wide responsibility for managing the day-to-day affairs of the church. It was Sandri who announced John Paul II's death to the world on April 2, 2005, saying that, 'We all feel like orphans this evening.'

tHis term since 2007 as head of the Congregation for Eastern Churches has given Sandri a special appreciation for the experience of Christians in the Middle East, and he's been outspoken in defense of the beleaguered Christian population in Iraq.

tMost observers believe that Sandri does not have quite the intellectual background of either Ouellet or Ravasi, nor does he possess Ravasi's skills as a communicator and goodwill ambassador to secular non-believers. On the other hand, he has the strongest record as a Vatican administrator of the three men, and enjoys wide respect among his fellow cardinals.

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