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A papal front-runner may get a boost in Milan

by John L. Allen Jr.



Cardinal Angelo Scola (CNS/Bob Roller)

Editor's Note: Cardinal Angelo Scola was named this morning as the new head of the Archdiocese of Milan, Italy's largest diocese. Following is a look at who Scola is and what his appointment to Milan might mean. The article was written by NCR senior correspondent John L. Allen, Jr., for the June 24 print issue of National Catholic Reporter, before Scola's appointment was announced.

ANALYSIS

Sometimes a job is important not only for what its occupant does, but what it symbolizes. In the Catholic church there's no better example than the archbishop of Milan, Italy, whose incumbent is almost automatically considered *tanto papabile*, i.e., a leading candidate to become the next pope.

In the 20th century, two archbishops of Milan went on to the papacy, Pius XI and Paul VI, while two others, Cardinals Carlo Maria Martini and Dionigi Tettamanzi, spent more or less their entire tenures surrounded by speculation over their future prospects.

That background makes the current countdown toward Pope Benedict XVI's choice for who will take over from Tettamanzi, which is expected soon, a matter of interest across the entire Catholic world. According to veteran Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli, the top candidate is an already familiar face: Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice, Italy.

If Scola does indeed go to Milan, he will likely be touted in the media as a sort of crown prince of Catholicism -- the lead item in every story or broadcast about the next conclave, from now until whenever it occurs.

Even without the cachet of the papal sweepstakes, church-watchers have long regarded the 69-year-old Scola as an intriguing figure. He's very much in sync theologically with the current pontificate, but with a more extroverted personality, a deeply global perspective, and somewhat greater optimism about the church's prospects in the here and now.

Born in 1941 in Malgrate, Italy, a small town in the Lombardy region, Scola comes from a humble background -- his father was a truck driver, his mother a housewife. He attended the University of the Sacred Heart in Milan in the early 1960s, where he became a friend and disciple of an Italian priest named Msgr. Luigi Giussani, founder of the "Communion and Liberation" movement.

At the time, Italians saw Communion and Liberation as a conservative alternative both to the "Catholic Action" movement and to the broadly progressive ethos of the Milan archdiocese under Cardinals Giovanni Battista Montini (who became Paul VI) and Giovanni Colombo.

Scola later studied at the prestigious University of Fribourg in Switzerland, where his area of interest was theological anthropology. He was drawn to thinkers who had been part of the reform-minded majority at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), but who later developed reservations about the direction of the postconciliar church. He was especially influenced by Cardinal Henri de Lubac and Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar, and later published book-length interviews with both theologians.

Scola became a cofounder of the Italian edition of *Communio*, the international theological journal founded as a conservative counterpoint to *Concilium*, the journal of the council's progressive wing. From 1986 to 1991, Scola served as a consultor for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, while then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was in charge. In 1995, he was named rector of the Lateran University in Rome.

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In 1982 Scola was appointed to the faculty at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, created to defend Catholic teaching on issues such as divorce, artificial reproduction, cloning, homosexuality and abortion. During John Paul's papacy, figures associated with the institute at The Catholic University of America in Washington served as architects of the struggle against what the late pope described as a "culture of death" in the secular West.

Benedict is himself a longtime admirer of both Giussani and Communion and Liberation; in 2005, shortly before his election to the papacy, he volunteered to lead Giussani's funeral Mass. To illustrate the influence those ties afford Scola, he was the one who suggested that Benedict consider creating a Vatican department dedicated to "New Evangelization," which the pontiff promptly did. The idea actually originated with Giussani.

In early May, Scola presided over Benedict's brief visit to Venice, where the pontiff recalled the three patriarchs of Venice in the 20th century who went on to become popes: Pius X, John XXIII, and John Paul I. (Traditionally the archbishop of Venice carries the title of "Patriarch.") Though Benedict didn't connect the dots, the takeaway seemed unmistakable: It could happen again.

Given its history, Venice has always styled itself as a bridge between cultures, and Scola has embraced that legacy since taking over in January 2002. One signature cause is his "Oasis Foundation," launched in 2004 to promote solidarity among Christians in the Middle East and dialogue with the Islamic world.

In a 2010 interview with *NCR*, Scola distinguished among three currents in Islam: the moderates, who he said are generally not representative of the Muslim "street"; the radicals, who are not open to dialogue; and "traditional Islam," meaning the vast majority of observant Muslims generally not represented in official channels of conversation. One aim of Oasis, he said, is to engage traditional Islam.

As opposed to some European prelates, Scola is typically not inclined to handwringing about the "silent apostasy," in the words of John Paul II, of the West. Instead, Scola tends to believe that Christianity still has culture-shaping capacity, if it finds the nerve to make its case effectively.

That profile has made Scola a point of reference both in the global church and in the Vatican. In 2005, for instance, he served as the relator, or chairman, for the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist.

To be sure, until an official announcement comes down, there's no guarantee that Scola will wind up in Milan. According to Tornielli's report, others in the running include Bishop Francesco Lambiasi of Rimini, Italy (where Communion and Liberation's massive annual meeting takes place); Msgr. Aldo Giordano, the Vatican's representative to the Council of Europe; and Archbishop Pietro Parolin, a respected former official of the Secretariat of State now serving as the pope's ambassador in Venezuela.

Yet even if Scola stays put, he could still be a formidable contender heading into a conclave. Without knowing how Milan will shake out, Irish bookmaker Paddy Power already has Scola down as a 6-1 favorite to be the next pope.

No matter what his address over the next few years, therefore, Cardinal Angelo Scola is a prelate well worth tracking.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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