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A poll average from Rome on the next pope

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All Things Catholic

Right now, the "next pope" conversation isn't creating much buzz. There's no sign of a health crisis around Benedict XVI, and Catholic attention around the world is focused on more local matters: the LCWR crackdown in the States, the disciplining of liberal priests and calls for Cardinal Sean Brady to resign over the sex abuse crisis in Ireland, a political scandal involving Communion and Liberation in Italy, and so on.

Yet with an 85-year-old pope beginning to show his age, speculation about who might come next is always in the background, even if it's on a low boil.

Unknown Object

I just returned from a couple of weeks in Rome, and below I offer a sort of "poll average" of the current state of thinking about papal candidates among Vatican-watchers, by which I mean Vatican personnel, prelates from around the world, diplomats, journalists, academics, and so on. Such conventional wisdom is hardly infallible, so take this for what it's worth ? no more, really, than the kind of thing you'll hear at many Roman dinner tables.

The eleven names below are organized into concentric circles of plausibility, from "front-runners" to "possibilities" to "long shots." My experience is that pretty much everybody agrees on the top two names on this list, Cardinals Angelo Scola and Marc Ouellet, but after that things get murkier.

For each candidate, I offer a thumbnail sketch of the usual case for and against. These aren't designed to reflect the full range of views about each man in wider Catholic discussion, but rather the points likely to carry the most weight among cardinals ? who, of course, are the ones who will do the voting.

Front-Runners

1. Cardinal Angelo Scola, 70, Italy, Archbishop of Milan

The case for: Scola, a veteran academic whose interest is theological anthropology, is very much in sync with Benedict XVI, but he's personally more of an extrovert with a somewhat greater optimism about the church's prospects in the here and now. One signature initiative is the "Oasis" project, designed to foster dialogue with Islam and to support Christians in the Middle East ? two front-burner priorities for any future pope. It was Scola who suggested to Benedict that he create a new Vatican department dedicated to the "New Evangelization" (based on an idea from the late Fr. Luigi Guissani, founder of Communion and Liberation). Fans say that Scola blends John Paul's swagger with Benedict's intellectual heft, making him the ideal man to carry the "New Evangelization" forward.

The case against: Italian cardinals are notoriously divided, so any Italian candidate likely will face opposition. Some Italians are leery of Scola's roots in Communion and Liberation, not to mention the way he's distanced himself amid scandals involving politicians linked to the movement. Since he's never held a full-time Vatican job, some may question if he has what it takes to remedy its perceived problems of governance. Scola can also occasionally come off as a bit theoretical and dense, prompting the question of whether it's wise to follow one teaching pontificate with another.

2. Cardinal Marc Ouellet, 67, Canada, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops

The case for: A native of Quebec, Ouellet is another intellectual disciple of Benedict XVI, respected for his brains, his integrity and his spiritual depth. He's quite a cosmopolitan, having grown up in French-speaking Canada, studied in Austria and Germany and served as a Sulpician priest in Colombia. He's put in two tours as a Vatican official, and in between he led the Quebec archdiocese ? giving him a mix of both pastoral experience and Roman seasoning. Ouellet would represent a break from the European domination of the papacy, the "first pope from the New World." Supporters say he would make a prayerful, humble pontiff, as well as a strong teacher of the faith and defender of Catholic identity.

The case against: Some might argue that Ouellet is too much like Benedict XVI for his own good ? cerebral, retiring, uncomfortable in the spotlight and more passionate about the life of the mind than realpolitik. As one veteran Vatican-watcher put it, speaking of Ouellet, "A Ratzingerian is inevitably going to be less than Ratzinger. You always lose something with a photocopy."

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3. Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, 68, Argentina, Prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches

The case for: Sandri was the Vatican's "substitute," or chief of staff, from 2000 to 2005, where he earned a reputation as a capable manager. Theologically, he's by the book, but politically he's seen as a moderate rather than a hard-liner. Biographically, he's the best of both worlds ? an Argentine by birth, so he could be touted as a "Third World pope," yet he comes from an Italian family and has spent most of his career in the Vatican so he knows its workings from the inside. Sandri might draw some American support, since one of his assignments as a diplomat was in the papal embassy in Washington.

The case against: Some argue that Sandri might make a better Secretary of State than a pope, where he could make the trains run on time while someone else does the teaching and inspiring. There's also a concern that because Sandri served under Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the former Secretary of State under John Paul II, he might be tainted by some of the scandals of the Sodano era ? especially those involving

the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ. Moreover, the Congregation for Eastern Churches may not be the best Vatican post from which to win friends among the king-maker cardinals in a future conclave.

Possibilities

1. Cardinal Péter Erd?, 59, Hungary, Archbishop of Budapest

The case for: Erd? has twice been elected the president of European bishops' conference, and since roughly half the cardinals who will elect the next pope are Europeans, that show of confidence is significant. The European bishops under Erd? have also worked hard to establish good relations with their opposite numbers in Africa, so he could pick up support in the developing world. He's considered a staunch traditionalist on doctrine, but good at building consensus among different currents in the European episcopacy.

The case against: Erd? is a canon lawyer by training, with a very precise mind, but some may wonder if he has the skills and personality to be able to reach out successfully to the wider world. At 59, he's the fourth youngest member of the College of Cardinals, and that may create questions about whether his would be an excessively long papacy. Some may also wonder if the Catholic situation in post-Communist Hungary is so unique that it's not the best preparation to lead the universal church.

2. Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, 69, Italy, Archbishop of Genova

The case for: When Bagnasco was tapped as president of the Italian bishops' conference in 2007, he was seen as an acceptable, but relatively weak, compromise. In the time since, his stock has risen. He's now viewed as a capable leader in his own right, fairly savvy about both secular politics and the media. The fact that Bagnasco is sometimes perceived as at odds with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the current Secretary of State under Benedict XVI, may actually work in his favor, since at least some cardinals fault Bertone for the Vatican's managerial stumbles, and would thus see Bagnasco as an alternative.

The case against: Bagnasco has a high profile in Italy, but isn't terribly well known elsewhere. Some may wonder if the election of the president of the Italian conference would mean that Italian rivalries would follow him into the papacy, an especially sensitive point in the wake of the Vatican leaks scandal. There's also the question of whether Bagnasco has a sufficiently global vision, since he's never really studied or worked outside Italy.

3. Cardinal Odilo Pedro Scherer, 62, Brazil, Archbishop of São Paulo

The case for: Latin America is home to roughly half the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, and many church-watchers regard Scherer as the strongest Latin candidate. He's got plenty of Roman experience, having studied at the Gregorian University and later worked in the Congregation for Bishops from 1994 to 2001. In Brazil's fairly progressive Catholic ethos, Scherer is usually seen as a conservative (he's got good ties, for instance, to Opus Dei), but elsewhere his views often come off as moderate, meaning he could potentially attract support from different currents.

The case against: For one thing, the last two Brazilians who came to Rome, Cardinals Claudio Hummes and João Braz de Aviz, both have been seen as nice guys but perhaps not quite tough enough, so Scherer might have to overcome that question mark. Although he has the experience of running the largest archdiocese in the world's largest Catholic country, some question how effective he's been at stemming the tides of Pentecostalism, secularism and religious indifference that have eaten away at Brazil's Catholic base. Finally, Scherer comes from a family of German immigrants, so some might interpret his election as

representing a second German in a row.

Long Shots

1. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, 69, Italy, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture

The case for: Ravasi is undeniably brilliant, conversant not just in theology but across a staggering variety of disciplines, including world literature, art, science and philosophy. He's pioneered the "Courtyard of the Gentiles" project, the Vatican's most successful recent effort to engage secular non-belief. Ravasi typically comes off as funny, relaxed and affable, and is remarkably down to earth for a man of his erudition, having written not just learned tracts but also popular columns in Italian newspapers.

The case against: In the tribal world of Italian church politics, Ravasi has always been a tribe unto himself ? which is part of his charm, but it also means he has no natural base of support. There are also questions about his ability to bend the Vatican to his will, as well as whether his classically European intellect is suited to the new global realities of Catholicism.

2. (tie) Cardinal Peter Turkson, 63, Ghana, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and Cardinal Robert Sarah, 66, Guinea, President of the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum"

The case for: If the next pope were to be an African, it would likely be one of these two. Both served as bishops of major dioceses in Africa, and both are now working in Vatican posts. Turkson would get the nod for deeper pastoral experience, having served as both Archbishop of Cape Coast in Ghana and as an officer of SECAM, the continental umbrella group for bishops' conferences in Africa; Sarah would be seen as the heavier hitter inside the Vatican. Turkson has a higher public profile, he's an extremely likeable man, and he usually comes off as a pragmatist, able to engage a wide cross-section of views. Many see Sarah as the more effective behind-the-scenes force, and probably the more conservative of the two.

The case against: Aside from the fact that Turkson and Sarah might split whatever vote there would be for an African, each has potential liabilities. As the head of a pontifical council (which doesn't really wield binding authority over much of anything), Turkson hasn't fully laid to rest questions about his ability to govern. Sarah, meanwhile, hasn't yet demonstrated the comfort level in the public spotlight that will be expected of any 21st century pope.

3. Cardinal Timothy Dolan, 62, United States, Archbishop of New York

The case for: During the consistory in Rome last February, Dolan was the celebrity. The speech he delivered to the College of Cardinals on the "New Evangelization," in the presence of Benedict XVI, is still being talked about; one Vatican-watcher compared it to Obama's 2004 keynote address at the DNC, in the sense of being the speech that made him a star. American reaction to Dolan may be focused on his policy choices, but elsewhere Dolan looms largest as a symbol, incarnating a style of church leadership that's relaxed rather than angst-ridden; confident rather than in retreat; able to speak the language of the street and to laugh at itself. In Rome, there's a growing consensus that Dolan is the first plausible American papabile.

The case against: Aside from the historical taboo against a "superpower pope," which may be waning but is still in the air, there are other reservations about Dolan. Although he's lived and worked in Rome, he's never held a Vatican job. There are concerns about how well he knows the realities of the church outside the West. His Italian, while passable, isn't fluent, which has historically been seen as a prerequisite for the Bishop of Rome. Temperamentally, some cardinals may regard the boisterous, exuberant Dolan as just

too much of a shock to the system ? well suited to New York, perhaps, but not so much the papacy.

4. Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle, 54, Philippines, Archbishop of Manila

The case for: At 54, Tagle is already a key point of reference for Catholicism in Asia, the "go-to" figure within the Asian bishops' conference on most theological questions. He's taken strong positions against a proposed "Reproductive Health" bill in the Philippines, which includes promotion of birth control, yet his towering social concern is defense of the poor, and he's got a strong environmental streak. He's a gifted communicator, making him a sought-after speaker and media personality. He drew rave reviews for his performance at a 2008 International Eucharistic Congress in Quebec, where observers say he brought an entire stadium to tears. One Filipino commentator has said that Tagle has "a theologian's mind, a musician's soul and a pastor's heart."

The case against: To begin, there's the obvious fact that Tagle is not yet a cardinal. (That could change as early as next year, if there's indeed a consistory in 2013 consisting mostly of non-curial appointments). Despite having studied in Rome, Tagle has no real Vatican experience. Some may wonder how much he's up to speed on realities in other parts of the world; during a Vatican summit in February on the sex abuse crisis, for instance, Tagle was caught off guard when reporters asked what the law is in his country on reporting accusations of child abuse, suggesting to some that he hasn't assimilated the lessons of the crisis elsewhere. Tagle's youth is also likely a drawback, at least for now. Even if the cardinals are inclined to roll the dice, they may hesitate about having to live with that bet for what could be three decades or more.

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