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# DeBunking Myths About A Conclave

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 14, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Several myths surround the election of a new Pope, all with some degree of truth to them, but most of which do not hold up when submitted to a bit of historical scrutiny. In the weeks ahead, we shall be treated to all sorts of speculation and other foolishness, so let?s clear away some of the most prominent myths now.

**Myth #1**: He who enters the conclave a pope, comes out a cardinal. This saying has a long history and it may have once been true, especially when the kings of Spain and France and the Austrian Emperor retained a veto power over the selection and could exercise it against a frontrunner. This happened the last time in 1903 when the Austrian Emperor vetoed the candidacy of Cardinal Mariano Rampolla, who had served Pope Leo XIII as Secretary of State and appeared likely to win election. The cardinals had long resented this intrusion in their affairs and, soon afterwards, Pope Pius X, who had benefited from the Austrian veto, nonetheless barred the practice of imperial vetoes in all future elections.

In two elections during the 20th century, the favorite heading into the conclave won election to the papacy. In 1939, with the storm clouds of what would become World War II gathering, the cardinals quickly chose the Vatican?s Secretary of State, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli as Pope Pius XII. And, in 1963, with the Second Vatican Council already begun, the cardinals turned to Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, the Archbishop of Milan, to ascend the papal throne which he did as Pope Paul VI. He, too, was the favorite going into the conclave. And, in 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger was widely considered the favorite to succeed Pope John Paul II.

Certainly, the papal election of 1939 and 1963 were held at critical moments, with a world crisis and an ecclesiastical event of enormous significance at stake. In 2005, after the long papacy of Pope John Paul II, the cardinals may have also felt a special burden to fill the large shoes he had left. But, the fact is that sometimes the favorite is the favorite because his skills and resume make him the favorite and the cardinals will not toss that aside if they think he is the man best suited to lead the Church.

**Myth #2**: A break with tradition by the cardinals in one regard will lead to other breaks with tradition. I recall in 1978 when the cardinals, in the second conclave of that year, turned to a non-Italian for the first time in hundreds of years. Many liberals were quick to discern in this break with tradition the potential for other changes in the Church. Needless to say, their hopes were unfulfilled. In Rome itself, one year into the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, bumper stickers emerged saying, ?Paul, come back. All is forgiven.?

This myth is heard today when examining the possibility of an African or Latin American or Asian pope. Electing a pope from the global South, where the Church is growing, would not mean that the Church?s ban on women priests was going away. Most cardinals from the global South have some training in Rome or served in the Vatican curia. Indeed, some of them are ?more Roman than the Romans,? lacking the historical perspective and relatively laid back style of leadership such a perspective invites.

**Myth #3**: The cardinals will send a message in their choice. This myth is related to Myth #2. It suggests that by selecting a pope from the global South, the cardinals would be sending a message that the Church must look to its missionary lands, not to old Europe, for its future.

If you want to send a message, you vote for the Green Party in parliamentary elections. The cardinals are electing a pope. If, say, Cardinal Peter Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and former Archbishop of Cape Coast in Ghana, it will be because the cardinals see in him the leadership qualities the desire in the next pope, not because he is African.

**Myth #4**: Nationality matters a lot. Again, this is related to the previous myth. If Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for Oriental Churches, was selected, the choice would reflect the cardinals for someone who knows the curia inside out and can make the trains run on time, not because Sandri is originally from Argentina. He has been in Rome, or in the service of the Vatican diplomatic corps since his twenties. He was the Sostituto, almost the equivalent of Chief-of-Staff, to Pope John Paul II. He is about as Argentinian as I am. All the cardinal electors are churchmen first and foremost. Their political and national allegiance is secondary and has been for most of their lives.

Nationality does matter in two regards. The Italians might want the papacy back. And, because the Italians are still the largest voting block, with 28 papal electors, and because an Italian more easily attends dicastry meetings and meets other cardinals there, an Italian might be better acquainted with his colleagues than, say, a cardinal from Australia. And, there are historic sees whose incumbents are almost ex officio papabile. In the twentieth century, three conclaves turned to the Patriarch of Venice for their pope ? 1903, 1958 and the first conclave in 1978 ? and two conclaves turned to the Archbishop of Milan ? 1922 and 1963. Only once did the cardinals select someone from the curia, 1939, although Cardinal Giacomo della Chiesa in 1914 and Cardinal Montini in 1958 had long experience in the curia before becoming residential archbishops. A candidate from the global South with experience of the curia would have a better shot than a candidate without such experience, to be sure, but there are plenty of Italian candidates with both curial experience and at least some time running a diocese.

The other regard in which nationality matters has to do with the U.S. It is true that Cardinal Timothy Dolan made a fine impression on the cardinals at the consistory a year ago, and some Roman dinner table conversations find his name mentioned, including conversations among cardinal electors. But, the fact is that non-Americans have a deep suspicion of the U.S., a suspicion that was greatly aided by the Iraq War, but is more fundamentally a result of American cultural influence eating away at the traditional customs and cultures of the rest of the world. I simply cannot imagine them selecting an American.

**Myth #5**: For all the talk about the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the election is essentially an exercise in politics. This is false. The 117 cardinal electors really do spend a fair amount of their days at prayer. In fact, if a candidate were seen as too worldly, as incapable of leading the Church in prayer, that alone might disqualify him. In 1978, it was not just Cardinal Karol Wojtyla?s vigorous youth, nor his penetrating intellect, nor the novelty of selecting a non-Italian that attracted the cardinals to him: He had the ability, in a crowded room, to become lost in prayer and you could see it. The cardinals noticed it. Besides, I defy the most cold-hearted soul to walk into the Sistine Chapel at any time and not be moved. But, when entering that heavenly space, dressed in a red cassock, with the choir chanting the ?Veni Creator Spiritus,? and knowing that you are one of only 117 men entrusted with electing the next Successor of Peter, no one could be immune to the spiritual aspect of the selection.

The reverse claim, that there is really no politics involved, that all is entrusted to the Holy Spirit, is also false. Indeed, then-Cardinal Ratzinger once said that there were so many disastrous popes that the guarantee of the Spirit?s guidance must be understood not as a promise of ?success,? but as a more minimalist guarantee that

?we can?t entirely wreck the thing.? (I would say that such a minimalist understanding of papal claims commends itself in other regards as well. I have no objection to the doctrine of papal infallibility so long as it is understood in such terms, not in the expansive terms many seem to claim for it.)  There will be politics aplenty within the conclave. Cardinals are not called ?princes of the Church? for nothing. At a very basic level, the electors know they will have to work with the candidate they choose, so they will want someone they may already know, or at least someone they see as sympathetic to their concerns. These concerns may be quite different if you are a residential archbishop from those of a curial cardinal, although there is overlap. If the trains are not running on time, the curialists get frustrated on a daily basis, but the residential archbishops who can?t get the auxiliaries they need have their share of frustration too.

So, those are the five major myths of a papal conclave that warrant debunking. I am sure that my colleague John Allen will have even more detailed historical and contemporary analysis of the upcoming conclave. John has the unique ability to conduct an on-line seminar on the papacy here at NCR. One thing is sure: The next month will be fascinating.

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