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Papabile of the Day: The Men Who Could Be Pope

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

Conclave 2013

Rome — *John Allen is offering a profile each day of one of the most frequently touted papabili, or men who could be pope. The old saying in Rome is that he who enters a conclave as pope exits as a cardinal, meaning there's no guarantee one of these men actually will be chosen. They are, however, the leading names drawing buzz in Rome these days, ensuring they will be in the spotlight as the conclave draws near. The profiles of these men also suggest the issues and the qualities other cardinals see as desirable heading into the election.*

When it comes to "next pope" stories, nothing's sexier from a media point of view than the idea of a "black pope," referring in this case not to the head of the Jesuit order (traditionally dubbed the "black pope," ostensibly because of the black cassock the Superior General wears, but also a derogatory reference to alleged Jesuit intrigue), but a pontiff from Africa.

At the symbolic level, the notion of what's traditionally seen as the planet's ultimate First World institution being led by a black man from the southern hemisphere has an undeniable magic.

Among the 117 cardinals who will shortly gather in the Sistine Chapel to elect the successor to Benedict XVI, the name of Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana usually figures prominently on the short list of possible African candidates.

Indeed, Turkson himself has not been shy about embracing the possibility. In a recent interview with the U.K. *Telegraph*, Turkson openly speculated about what it would mean for him to become pope. (In a good candidate for understatement of the year, Turkson was quoted as saying that "it would signal a lot of [personal] change.")

Peter Kodow Appiah Turkson, 64, was born in Western Ghana to a Methodist mother and a Catholic father, a biographical fact he often cites to explain his interest in ecumenism. He studied at St. Anthony-on-Hudson Seminary in New York before it was closed in 1989, and also at the prestigious Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. He became Archbishop of Cape Coast in Ghana in 1992, and went on to serve as president of the national bishops' conference and to play an active role in SECAM, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar.

In 2009, Benedict XVI tapped Turkson as the relator, or general secretary, for a month-long synod of bishops on Africa. As things turned out he didn't need to pack for the trip home, because near the end of the synod the Vatican announced Turkson's appointment as president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

Turkson is generally seen as affable, open, with a lively sense of humor and charmingly frank, not given to mushy diplomatic platitudes. Across Africa, he's seen as among the continent's most dynamic church leaders.

Not coincidentally, the headquarters of SECAM is in Ghana, reflecting the leadership role Ghanaians have long played in African Catholic affairs.

The case for Turkson rests on several points.

First, many cardinals want a pope with deep pastoral experience in a diocese; others are looking for somebody with Vatican background who can get the place under control. Since Turkson's resume features both, he could appeal to both those desires.

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Second, in the abstract, some cardinals find the idea of putting a face on the burgeoning Catholic footprint outside the West attractive, and Turkson would certainly do that in a flash.

Third, for the most part Turkson would come into office without any baggage from the recent scandals to afflict the Vatican. He wasn't part of the Vatileaks mess, he hasn't had anything to do with the Vatican Bank, and he doesn't have any particular track record on the clerical sexual abuse crisis. (When SNAP, the leading victims' group, recently issued an evaluation of papal candidates, Turkson was among those the group said it didn't have enough information about to assess.)

Fourth, for a church committed to a "New Evangelization," Turkson would be an attractive and energetic leader perhaps capable of enticing people to take a new look at the Catholic church.

Fifth, he reflects the very traditional African ethos on matters of sexual morality and the family, meaning that Turkson's election would not be threatening to those cardinals most concerned with bolstering the church's pro-life stance. A recent profile of Turkson in the *Independent* dubbed him "Conservatism's Caped Crusader" for exactly that reason.

Sixth, relations with Islam will surely be high on the next pope's to-do list, and Turkson has personal experience since his paternal uncle is a Muslim. In Ghana, Turkson lived amid Muslims, and has been a leader in Catholic/Muslim relations across Africa. He's no pushover, either, taking a strong line on the need for Muslim societies to respect religious freedom.

The knocks on Turkson include the following.

First, the Council for Justice and Peace is not perceived to be among the Vatican's heavyweight departments, so there's doubt in some quarters about whether it's adequate preparation for the quantum leap to the papacy. Moreover, Turkson's friends were saying back in 2009 that he'd really prefer to return to Ghana rather than to serve in Rome, which might lead some to wonder if he's up to a far more demanding Roman gig.

Second, some conservatives see Turkson as a bit too center-left for their taste, especially on matters of economic justice. In 2011, his council issued a document titled "Towards Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems in the Context of Global Political Authority," which among other things expressed a clear rejection of 'neo-liberal' economic policies (in American argot, 'neo-conservative') and an equally clear endorsement of a "true world political authority" to regulate a globalized economy.

Critics, dismayed by the note's content, challenged its Vatican standing. George Weigel dismissed it as the product of a "rather small office in the Roman Curia" while Bill Donohue said it contains "neologisms" not found in the thought of Pope Benedict XVI.

Third, some wonder if Turkson is really ready for prime time. During last fall's synod on New Evangelization, Turkson used one of the meeting's opportunities for free exchange to show an alarmist Youtube video about Islam, which contained over-hyped statistics about Muslim immigration in Europe that had already been thoroughly debunked.

The blowback inside the synod was sufficiently strong that other bishops felt compelled to stand up and call off the dogs. Though Turkson quickly apologized, it left lingering doubts in some quarters about his judgment.

Fourth, Turkson's open commentary about the desirability of an African pope, even flirting with the idea of it being him, have produced a bitter aftertaste among those who think he's more or less campaigning for the job. Friends insist that it's simply Turkson being honest and a nice guy, not wanting to say "no" to reporters needing comment, and not wanting to duck obvious questions.

Yet in an electoral process where putting oneself into the spotlight is often frowned upon, being a nice guy sometimes comes at a price.

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