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Papabile of the Day: The Men Who Could Be Pope

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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.*

One could make a pretty strong argument that nobody's chances of becoming the next pope benefit more from Benedict XVI's resignation than those of Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila in the Philippines.

Under ordinary circumstances, Tagle's youth would be seen as an almost insuperable bar to election. At 55, he's three years younger than John Paul II was when he was elected in 1978, so a vote for Tagle would be tantamount to a vote for another long papacy, perhaps as much as 30 years.

Tagle actually looks even younger. The story goes that in the mid-1990s, when then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger introduced Tagle to Pope John Paul II as a new member of the Vatican's International Theological Commission, Ratzinger jokingly assured the pope that the youthful-seeming Filipino had, in fact, received his first Communion.

Especially with a figure many cardinals regard as something of an unknown, a choice for such a young pope would strike them as an awfully big risk.

Now that the precedent has been set that a pope can resign, however, the calculus is different. Tagle could give the church 10 or 15 years, then step aside -- a thought that may well induce some cardinals to look

past his age to other qualities.

When they do, they're likely to find a lot to like about the man touted as the "Great Asian Hope" to take over the Throne of Peter. One Filipino commentator has said Tagle has "a theologian's mind, a musician's soul and a pastor's heart."

Earlier this year, before the news of Benedict's resignation broke, a Filipino business journal named Tagle its "Man of the Year," describing him as "young, unassuming, and without airs," a bishop "who more than understands contemporary ideas."

Born in Manila, Tagle went to seminary in Quezon City and later did his doctoral work at The Catholic University of America in Washington. He also studied in Rome before returning to the Philippines to serve as a pastor and teacher. He was seen as a rising star in the Asian church, explaining his appointment in 1997 to the Vatican's main doctrinal advisory body. He was named bishop of Imus in 2001.

Theologically and politically, Tagle is considered balanced. He's taken strong positions against the Philippines' proposed Reproductive Health Bill, which includes promotion of birth control. Yet his towering social concern is defense of the poor, and he's also got a strong environmental streak.

Tagle's doctoral dissertation at Catholic University, written under Fr. Joseph Komonchak, was a favorable treatment of the development of episcopal collegiality at the Second Vatican Council. Moreover, Tagle served for 15 years on the editorial board of the Bologna, Italy-based "History of Vatican II" project founded by Giuseppe Alberigo, criticized by some conservatives for an overly progressive reading of the council.

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In the Imus diocese, Tagle was famous for not owning a car and taking the bus to work every day, describing it as a way to combat the isolation that sometimes comes with high office. He was also known for inviting beggars outside the cathedral to come in and eat with him. One woman was quoted describing a time she went looking for her blind, out-of-work, alcoholic husband, suspecting she might track him down in a local bar, only to find that he was lunching with the bishop.

Here's another typical story. Not long after Tagle arrived in Imus, a small chapel located in a run-down neighborhood was waiting for a priest to say Mass at around 4 a.m. for a group mostly made up of day laborers. Eventually, a youngish cleric showed up on a cheap bicycle, wearing simple clothes and ready to start the Mass. An astonished member of the congregation realized it was the new bishop and apologized that they hadn't prepared a better welcome. Tagle said it was no problem; he got word late the night before that the priest was sick and decided to say the Mass himself.

Tagle is 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. He's a very 21st-century prelate -- he hosts a program on YouTube, and he's got his own Facebook page.

Tagle has also been a leader in pushing the church in Asia to take an aggressive stance on clerical abuse. He was among the keynoters at an international summit on the abuse crisis held last year at Rome's Gregorian University that several Vatican departments co-sponsored.

"Our mission [is] to protect human dignity, especially of the most vulnerable, the children," he's said.

The case for Tagle rests on three pillars.

First, he's an effective communicator and missionary at a time when Catholicism's highest internal priority is a new evangelization. There's a sort of E.F. Hutton quality about Tagle: When he talks, people listen.

During last fall's Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization, for instance, Tagle gave a standout speech cited by many participants as one of the most impressive things they heard all month. Tagle argued that in the Asian context, effective evangelization means a church that's humbler, simpler, and with a greater capacity for silence.

Second, Tagle incarnates the dramatic growth of Catholicism outside the West, putting a face on the dynamic and relatively angst-free form of Catholicism percolating in the southern hemisphere. He would certainly be a symbol of the church in the emerging world, but given his intellectual and personal qualities, hardly a hollow one.

Third, Tagle now has in-the-trenches pastoral experience of administering a large and complex archdiocese in Manila. Although he's only been on the job since 2011, Tagle generally gets good reviews in terms of his capacity to make the trains run on time.

The drawbacks to Tagle's candidacy can be expressed in four main points.

First, his age is still a problem. At least some cardinals don't like the idea of popes resigning, seeing it either as taking some of the luster off the papal office (as one former Vatican official said to me, "Now he might as well be the archbishop of Canterbury!") or as an indirect admission of failure. In any event, church law states no one can compel a pope to step down, so it will be entirely up the next pontiff to decide. In that light, the resignation hypothesis may not be enough for many cardinals to get past Tagle's youth.

Second, Tagle has zero Vatican experience other than attending the occasional synod, and his soft-spoken and humble demeanor may strike some cardinals as ill-suited for the housecleaning many believe the next pope will have to carry out inside the Vatican.

Even if one's not prepared to embrace conspiracy theories, such as a sensational report in *La Repubblica* Thursday that a shadowy gay lobby may have been involved in the Vatileaks affair and helped shape Benedict's decision to resign, most cardinals nevertheless feel that the right people were not always named to the right jobs under Benedict, and there was little accountability for poor performance.

As one longtime Vatican-watcher put it in the wake of the disastrous Holocaust-denying bishop affair in 2009, instead of an anguished papal letter of apology, "there should have been a row of heads on pikes all the way down to the Castel Sant'Angelo. That, they would have understood."

Some may well wonder if Tagle is really the guy to get tough.

Tagle could perhaps take the edge off some of those concerns by dropping hints about whom he might be inclined to choose as his Secretary of State, but that would veer awfully close to campaigning for the job.

Third, some cardinals may perceive Tagle as a bit too much to the left of center (as the "center" is defined, naturally, in the College of Cardinals) especially because of his connection to the Alberigo

history of Vatican II.

Fourth and most basically, some cardinals may look at Tagle and see a promising young churchman, but somebody who's not quite ready for prime time. One can imagine a number of them saying quietly to one another, "He'd make a great pope ... someday."

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