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Papabile of the Day: The Men Who Could Be Pope

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NCR Today

Conclave 2013

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.

During the run-up to the conclave, most of the buzz around papal candidates is generated by pundits and church-watchers, as opposed to the cardinals who will actually vote. As an index of broader opinion in the church, the buzz is often illuminating; as a guide to what might actually happen, it can be of limited utility.

The "Great Asian Hope" in the 2013 conclave could turn out to be a case in point.

On the buzz meter, the clear winner is Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila in the Philippines, whose nickname is "Chito." He's young, articulate, smiling, and media-savvy, with a reputation for simplicity and humility. Tagle is hugely popular back home, and tends to wow people wherever he goes.

Among the cardinals, however, there's another Asian who might seem a more compelling choice: Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith (formally, Albert Malcolm Ranjith Patabendige Don) of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

For one thing, Ranjith is 65, ten years older than Tagle, and probably right in line with the ideal age profile: Not as young as John Paul was in 1978, meaning he wouldn't have an overly long papacy, but not as old as Benedict XVI in 2005, meaning the church probably wouldn't face another transition too soon.

For another, Ranjith has extensive Vatican experience, so he wouldn't require the same on-the-job training as a complete outsider. He served as an official in the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (better known as "Propaganda Fidei"), as the pope's nuncio to Indonesia and East Timor, and then as Secretary for the Congregation of Divine Worship. He also studied in Rome at the Urbanian University and is proficient in Italian, usually seen as a core requirement for a prospective pope.

For a third, Ranjith profiles as a "Ratzingerian," meaning a churchman cut from the same cloth as Benedict XVI. That's especially the case regarding his attitudes on liturgy, supporting the older Latin Mass and rejecting secularizing tendencies in Catholic worship.

In 1994, as a young bishop, Ranjith led a commission that denounced the theological work of Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya, charging that he had questioned original sin and the divinity of Christ, as well as supporting women's ordination. The resulting furor first brought Ranjith into contact with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who backed his position.

For a fourth, Ranjith has real pastoral experience, having served as the Archbishop of Colombo in Sri Lanka since 2005.

Cardinals looking to reach out to the developing world, while also consolidating the intellectual and spiritual legacy of Benedict XVI, might find these four elements of Ranjith's *curriculum vitae* awfully enticing.

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Born in the small Sri Lankan town of Polgahawela in 1947, Ranjith is the eldest of fourteen children. In a 2006 interview, he said his vocation was stirred by the example of a French missionary from the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who served in his parish.

After earning his undergraduate degree in theology from the Urbanian, Ranjith earned his licentiate at the prestigious Pontifical Biblical Institute in 1978, with a thesis centered on the Epistle to the Hebrews. (While there, he studied under two future Jesuit cardinals ? Carlo Maria Martini and Albert Vanhoye.) Ranjith also did some postdoctoral work at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Marked out from the first as a rising star, in 1991 Ranjith became an auxiliary bishop of Colombo at the tender age of 43. He coordinated John Paul II's January 1995 visit to Sri Lanka, and one can infer that he acquitted himself well from the fact that he was named the first bishop of Ratnapura nine months later.

Among other things, Ranjith promoted inter-faith dialogue. Buddhism is Sri Lanka's dominant religion, but the country also has significant pockets of Hindus and Muslims, while Christians make up roughly seven percent of the population of 20 million.

In 2001, Ranjith was brought to Rome to work at Propaganda Fidei and was simultaneously named president of the Pontifical Mission Societies, giving him a wide network of contacts across the developing world.

Ranjith was dispatched in 2004 as the papal ambassador to Indonesia and East Timor, becoming the first Sri Lankan to serve as a nuncio. It was an unusual move, since Ranjith was not a graduate of Rome's Accademia Ecclesiastica and did not come out of the Vatican diplomatic corps. At the time, there were whispers that perhaps Ranjith had been "exiled" because he was seen as slightly too conservative for

some prelates, either in the developing world or his superiors at Propaganda Fidei.

That cloud seemed to lift nine months later, when the new pope, Benedict XVI, called Ranjith back to Rome to serve as the number two official at the Congregation for Divine Worship.

Over the next four years, Ranjith became something of a *bête noire* for liturgical progressives. He criticized communion in the hand, saying it was not envisioned by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and became widespread only after its "illegitimate introduction" in some countries. When Benedict authorized wider celebration of the old Latin Mass in 2007, Ranjith openly blasted bishops who didn't move quickly to implement it, accusing them of "disobedience ... and even rebellion against the pope."

Four years later he was moved out of Rome again, this time to become the Archbishop of Colombo. Some read this as a second exile; Italian Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli wrote at the time that Ranjith was "considered by his adversaries [to be] too close to the traditionalists and Lefebvrists." Others argued that it was a genuine promotion, intended to give Ranjith pastoral seasoning as the head of the diocese and to set him up as Benedict's point man across Asia.

He certainly didn't waste time. Four months after arriving, Ranjith issued new liturgical rules for Colombo requiring that communion be received on the tongue and in a kneeling position, forbidding laity from preaching, and barring priests from bringing customs from other religions into Catholic worship.

During the successive four years, Ranjith has profiled as a staunch conservative on doctrinal matters and sexual morality, while also embracing the peace-and-justice elements of Catholic social teaching.

"Love for the liturgy and love for the poor, two true and proper treasures of the church, one might say, have been the compass of my life," he said. Ranjith once added that although he's not an "adherent," he shares some of the values of the "no-global" movement protesting neo-liberal models of economic globalization.

During a meeting with clergy in October 2012, he said that Sri Lanka should not sacrifice its moral standards in exchange for foreign development aid.

"We don't want gay marriages and red light districts here, and we can also do without development that is achieved after compromising the environment," he said.

He also showed that he can throw some political weight around. In 2010, he vowed to boycott all state functions until a member of Mother Teresa's Daughters of Charity who had been arrested for allegedly trafficking in babies was released. The charges were swiftly dropped.

Shortly after arriving, Ranjith also spoke out against proposals in the West to impose sanctions on Sri Lanka for alleged war crimes during its sixteen-year civil war, aimed at suppressing an independence movement among the largely Hindu Tamil minority. Ranjith comes from the majority Sinhalese people, but the Catholic church in Sri Lanka includes members of both ethnic groups, and by reputation Ranjith has promoted reconciliation.

The case for him as pope rests on three pillars.

First, his closeness to Benedict XVI, both personally and in terms of his broad theological and liturgical outlook, means that he would be seen as a vote for continuity with the policies of the last two papacies.

Some of Benedict's protégés might be inclined to see Ranjith favorably, such as Cardinal Christoph

Schönborn of Vienna, whom Ranjith described in 2006 as a "dear friend."

Second, as an Asian, he would symbolically express the church's desire to reach out to the developing world, and to affirm the two-thirds of the Catholic population of 1.2 billion that now lives outside the West. Yet as a veteran Roman, he could be seen as a safe choice as the first pope from the developing world, someone who knows the Western mind and can navigate its culture.

Third, he has deep Vatican experience and has also tasted what it's like to be on the losing side of its internal tensions, which may suggest to some cardinals that he's the man to lead a reform of the bureaucracy. His résumé also suggests he has the toughness to push through changes over what is likely to be significant resistance.

Yet there are also some strong entries in Ranjith's debit column.

First, he may be a little too traditionalist for some of the moderates in the College of Cardinals ? "more Ratzingerian than Ratzinger himself," as some put it. In 2006, he said of the Lefebvrists that he wasn't a fan, but that "what they sometimes say about the liturgy, they say for good reason."

Second, Ranjith has a profile as an insider, someone who speaks a distinctively Catholic argot and whose priorities are often focused on the internal life of the church. That may not be the right skills set for some cardinals who say they want a "Missionary in Chief," someone who can move the Catholic product in a competitive post-modern religious marketplace by appealing to the outside world.

Third, the fact that Ranjith was twice sent packing from the Vatican, whatever the actual motives, may suggest to some cardinals that he has a track record of ruffling feathers. If they're looking for someone who can bring together diverse camps and mediate some of the church's internal tensions, this history may give them pause.

Despite those drawbacks, Ranjith may still be the most plausible Asian candidate to pass muster among the 115 cardinals who will cast ballots in this election. He may not have the charisma or media sex appeal of other "third world" candidates like Tagle or Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras, but to some cardinals he could seem an ideal one-two punch: Symbolically a candidate from outside the West, substantively a disciple of Benedict XVI.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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