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An anti-resignation pact? An over-80 pope?

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NCR Today

Conclave 2013

Rome — Back in 2004, a veteran Italian Vatican writer published a front-page piece predicting the end of the Lefebvrist schism in conjunction with the celebration of a Latin Mass at Rome's St. Mary Major Basilica. When it didn't happen, I jokingly asked him what had gone wrong.

His answer was lapidary: *In giornalismo, ogni tanto si deve rischiare*, which, loosely translated, means, "In journalism, every now and then you've got to take a shot."

I mention this in light of the predictable round of speculation and analysis currently filling the Italian papers in the run-up to the election of the next pope, which, as always, is wildly entertaining, but not necessarily meant to be taken literally.

One story making the rounds is that the cardinals will forge a pact among themselves that whoever the next pope is, he will pledge never to resign. The idea is that some cardinals see resignation as both destabilizing and, in some sense, a blow to the majesty of the papal office, and to the notion that it's not just a job but a form of spiritual paternity.

Another story, floated today in *La Repubblica*, claims it's possible that one of the over-80 cardinals could be elected to lead a "short but powerful" papacy, such as one of the three cardinals who conducted the Vatileaks inquest (Julian Herranz, Paul Josef Tomko, and Salvatore De Giorgi). Another possibility mentioned among the over-80s is Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the former Secretary of State, and Camillo Ruini, the once ultra-powerful vicar of Rome and president of the Italian bishops' conference.

Frankly, both of these bits of speculation seem a little implausible.

In centuries past, emperors and monarchs tried to impose pre-conclave pacts among cardinals, generally vows to swing the support of the papacy from one European dynasty to another. That was always seen as a compromise of the sovereign autonomy of the papacy, and those historical memories run deep.

If the question is whether some cardinals are privately unhappy that Benedict resigned, the answer is, 'sure.' Some would say that the wrong man resigned ? that if Benedict had a better team around him, starting with his Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, things would never have come to this.

The idea that they would consciously impose a pre-election vow on one another, however, seems a stretch.

As for an over-80 cardinal, that too seems a remote possibility, especially on the heels of a pope who just resigned citing his age.

It's also worth noting that in a way, these two hypotheses almost cancel one another out. If the idea is to avoid a scenario in which the next pope might feel compelled to follow Benedict's lead and resign, then choosing someone already well into his 80s doesn't seem the most natural choice.

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Of course, one can't fault the Italian press for floating such notions, or the rest of the global media for recycling them. Now that Benedict's papacy has come to a formal end, there's only one question that matters: Who's the next pope going to be?

Because we won't have an answer for at least a week, and maybe more, airwaves and column inches have to be filled with something. These reports raise interesting questions and probe unexplored possibilities, but the rule of thumb should be to sprinkle this food for thought with quite a few grains of salt.

The flip side of that logic, of course, is that having already experienced one huge shock, everything seems slightly more within the realm of possibility.

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