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Interview with Cardinal Sean O'Malley

by John L. Allen Jr.

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Conclave 2013

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Seen through American eyes, perhaps the biggest surprise of the run-up to the 2013 conclave has been the emergence of Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston as a longshot candidate for the papacy, at least as these things are assessed by the global media.

Going in, many church-watchers believed Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York was the great American hope, and he's indeed still drawing mention.

Yet in the days since Benedict XVI's Feb. 11 resignation announcement, a striking number of handicappers also have tossed O'Malley into the mix, partly because of his profile as a reformer on clerical abuse scandals, and partly because his plain brown Capuchin habit contrasts sharply with stereotypes of the Vatican as a bevy of power games and wealth.

Speaking today to NCR, O'Malley described the buzz around him as "surreal" and, if he thinks too much about it, "very scary." At the same time, he described himself as a "very dark horse" in the race.

Other highlights from O'Malley's interview include:

- He said the "central government of the church," meaning the Vatican, looms as a key issue for the conclave, including greater coordination and efficiency among the various Vatican departments.
- He called this conclave "more wide open" than the 2005 edition, when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger seemed the clear front-runner.
- O'Malley believes the conclave could start on Sunday, March 10.

- He insists he has not yet made up his mind about who will get his vote, and says he believes that's true of most cardinals.
- He said it's essential for the next pope to have a global vision, to respond to the "many different issues" facing the church in various parts of the world.

The full text of the interview appears below.

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So far, is there anything about the experience that has surprised you?

No, not really, except that I had always presumed this would be part of a funeral and a mourning period. I had expected to have a little more psychological preparation for the event itself. The Holy Father's resignation came as such a surprise, although in retrospect it probably shouldn't have been.

How are you preparing yourself?

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Spiritually, I'm trying to focus on the seriousness of this, asking for God's help in prayer. I'm also trying to learn as much as I can about my brother cardinals.

How are you doing that?

I downloaded Mr. Miranda's material, because he has a page of just the cardinals who are going to be at the conclave. [Note: Salvador Miranda of Florida International University maintains a web page on the cardinals.] I had my secretary go through and take out the biography of each one. A lot of them, of course, I knew, but this was one way of putting names to the faces of those I don't know. That's especially true of the Eastern Europeans and a couple of the Africans. I'm trying to read articles, to become acquainted with some of these issues in the past faced by conclaves. Your articles are all very interesting too.

I think the most important preparation will be the General Congregations this week. We've had some meetings among the cardinals, in which we've been able to talk about the situation in the church. It's very helpful just to be able to bounce these ideas off of each other. I'm really looking forward to this week as being a very important part of our preparation for the conclave.

You have the languages to read media from all over the world. To what extent are you paying attention to the stuff that's in the Italian media in these days? For example, the story yesterday about a Scherer/Piacenza ticket?

Practically every day I read *Le Monde*, and I read *La Stampa* because it's what you can get on your Kindle! So, I'm aware of what they're saying. I thought the article [on the Scherer/Piacenza ticket] was very interesting.

Does any of that influence you?

I think the General Congregations will be much more important. These other things are interesting, but I think these meetings will be the most critical thing.

As of today, the day before the General Congregation meetings begin, have you made your mind up about for whom you intend to vote?

No, I haven't.

Would you say that's probably true of most cardinals?

I would presume. I think we all have candidates out there who look good to us, but it's too early to narrow it down to the one person we're going to vote for.

One of the issues the General Congregation has to face is the date on the conclave. Some want to get this done as quickly as possible, others want to take more time. What's your feeling?

I know we're all looking to the desire to finish up before Holy Week, but I think we need to give it as much time as it needs. They're saying that we will decide whether the sessions will be morning and afternoons, and I'm hoping they will be both. Perhaps that will allow us to move more quickly. I think we need to use the time well, and in fact I don't know why we waited so long to start. If we have good discussions this week, by next week we should be able to start.

You mean around March 10?

Sunday, probably.

Do you find yourself consulting the Americans who have been through this before?

We've had opportunities here, at meals and so forth, to hear from the cardinals and get their experiences. It's been helpful. I have the impression, though, that this is perhaps a more wide-open conclave than the last one.

How do you see the main issues in this conclave?

Certainly the question of the central government of the church is very important.

Then, in the global church there's so many different issues with which the Holy Father has to grapple ? the rise of Islam, the Islamization of Europe, secularization of the West, the growth of the church in Africa and Latin America, how we're going to prepare for the evangelization of China, the future of religious life and the priesthood in all these places where there are shortages of priests and religious. All those issues come into play, it's not just one.

That's why the selection of the pope is so important, as well as the kind of team he'll be able to assemble around him in his curia to aid him in his ministry.

Let's go back to the central government of the church. Why is that important at this particular time?

The curia is relatively small for the task that it has, but it's the only way the Holy Father is able to interact with so many different facets of the church, our institutions and regions and so on. Greater coordination among the dicasteries themselves is important, and greater efficiency in dealing with the problems, so as not to thrust the Holy Father into the midst of all these controversies.

You're talking about avoiding unnecessary distractions?

Exactly.

That hasn't always been the case over the last eight years?

That's right.

You've talked about global vision and governance. What does that suggest in terms of the qualities you're looking for in the next pope?

He certainly has to have a good work ethic. Obviously, it's going to take someone with great interior strength to be able to cope with these issues. I would hope that he would be a great teacher and theologian, like Benedict and John Paul II, because that's been a great gift for us. There's also the ability to communicate the beauty of the gospel message.

You have to be aware that there has been talk about you as a candidate. How do you react to that?

It seems kind of surreal. I guess I don't pay that much attention to it. I realize that it's out there, but I'm a very dark horse. As I told the people in Boston, I bought a round-trip ticket, and I think I'll need it.

You're able to laugh it off?

If I think about it, it's very scary. Because I think the possibility is so remote, it's not something that I worry about. Obviously, any cardinal going in could be elected. In fact, it doesn't even have to be a cardinal.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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