

Flavor from campaign season in Rome

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 5, 2013 NCR Today
Conclave 2013
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In any walk of life, campaign season always brings people out of the woodwork with a point to make or an axe to grind, and Rome in the run-up to the looming conclave is certainly no exception.

Over the last few days, people from a bewildering variety of backgrounds and perspectives have been trying to make themselves heard above the din, some quite effectively, others coming off as just downright weird.

Among the former, the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, the main advocacy group for victims of clerical abuse in the United States, has been holding regular press conferences at Rome's Orange Hotel and releasing statements on issues as they emerge, such as the resignation of Cardinal Keith Patrick O'Brien of Scotland. SNAP runs a smart, fast press operation and has emerged as the most important critical voice on the sex abuse crisis in the pre-conclave period.

More brazen was a 20-something Italian activist who showed up last Thursday in front of a large TV platform at the end of the Via della Conciliazione, the broad street that leads to St. Peter's Square, just before the pope was due to lift off in his helicopter and head for Castel Gandolfo.

At that moment, the platform was full of anchors and guests for various global networks, all commenting on the pope's departure. They got a surprise when the young man stripped down to his boxer shorts (despite chilly temperatures), hoisted a bullhorn, and began shouting: "Ratzinger covers up for pedophiles!"

The demonstrator was so loud that most commentators had to kill their mics for a few minutes until Italian police gently took away his bullhorn. He wasn't arrested, but he hasn't been back to the platform since.

The race for the papacy got an unusual twist over the weekend as campaign posters began popping up around Rome touting Ghanaian Cardinal Peter Turkson's candidacy with a portrait of the praying prelate under the words, "Vote Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson."

The posters are basically a spoof on the Italian national elections, which happened to coincide with Benedict's resignation, but there's at least one person taking them seriously: Turkson himself, who's quietly put out word that he has absolutely nothing to do with them.

As in other elections, there's also some negative campaigning in the air. Recently, I got an email from a Canadian who wanted to bring to my attention an open letter to Cardinal Marc Ouellet published in the Canadian media in 2005 and signed by a group of laity who accused Ouellet of making Quebec Catholicism a "laughing stock" because on his watch it had been "kidnapped by fundamentalism."

Obviously, this person is not hoping Ouellet emerges from the Sistine Chapel as the next pope.

Then there're the oddballs a major church event always attracts.

Two days ago, for instance, I noticed a nattily attired older gentleman waiting for me as I stepped off the CNN platform. He asked if there was somewhere private we could speak, and I led him to one of the makeshift cabins TV crews have erected.

He handed me a plain brown envelope upon which he had written "Top Secret," and extracted some papers. The gist was that he claimed to have presented his private revelations to Pope John Paul II in the early 1990s, and that John Paul based every subsequent decision in his papacy on them -- the new evangelization, the Jubilee year, outreach to the Orthodox, all of it.

Naturally, what this guy, who happens to be Romanian, wanted to do was to lay out his vision for the next pope, which he's convinced comes with the same supernatural warrant. (I'll skip the details, which I'm not sure I understand myself -- it has something to do with the Great Pyramid of Giza.)

As of Monday, the mood among the cardinals seemed to be to play down any perception of a rush toward conclave. Last night, the Vatican Press Office announced the cardinals will not be meeting Tuesday or Wednesday afternoons.

Between now and whenever they actually do head into the Sistine Chapel, Rome likely will continue to swell with activists, pundits and visionaries, all competing for attention. The atmosphere is borderline chaotic, but it's also a reminder of both the staggering diversity of the church and the singular fascination exercised by the papacy.

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