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A Dolan boost, the SNAP effect, and Vatileaks

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NCR Today

Conclave 2013

Rome — While we wait for a date for the conclave, there are three fresh developments in the pre-conclave drama worth bringing up to speed.

A boost for Dolan

Veteran Italian writer Sandro Magister has offered a major plug for the candidacy of Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York as the next pope, styling him as the great hope of non-Roman cardinals who want to break the grip of "the feudal lords of the curia."

Magister upsets conventional wisdom by suggesting Dolan is actually a stronger runner than his fellow North American, Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, who usually finishes much nearer the top of candidate handicapping lists.

He also suggests that the candidacy of Cardinal Odilo Pedro Scherer of Brazil is being floated by the Vatican's old guard, who, Magister asserts, see him as "docile and bland." In part, the analysis is based on the fact that Scherer served in the Congregation for Bishops from 1994 to 2001 under Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, a consummate Vatican insider and presumably one of those "feudal lords" Magister had in mind.

Magister includes all the usual qualifications about this being a wide-open race, noting that Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston is also a plausible American candidate, but he closes by predicting Dolan could get "quite a few" votes on the first ballot.

Magister's piece doesn't cite sources, and much of it is analysis rather than reporting. Still, there continues

to be a drumbeat around Dolan that can't be ignored. Several days ago, word went around in journalistic circles that Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the still-powerful former president of the Italian bishops' conference, was telling people Dolan was his "dream" candidate.

For now, the conventional wisdom remains that the boisterous Dolan may be a bit too American to be elected. There's also concern in some quarters that the force of his personality would inevitably overshadow everyone else.

As one church-watcher put it: "If Dolan is elected, the other 5,000 bishops of the world might as well take the next 15 years off, because they'll never be seen or heard from again."

The SNAP effect

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, the main advocacy group for victims of clerical abuse in the United States, has been holding near-daily press briefings in Rome in the run-up to the conclave.

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On Wednesday, SNAP issued a "dirty dozen" list of 12 cardinals whose records on the abuse crisis, in SNAP's eyes, disqualify them from being elected pope. The list included all three Americans seen as even remotely plausible, including Dolan, O'Malley and Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C.

Today, SNAP issued a shorter list of three prelates they find acceptable: Cardinals Luis Antonio Tagle of the Philippines and Christoph Schönborn of Austria as well as Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Ireland. (It's telling that SNAP had to go outside the College of Cardinals to even find a third name they could swallow.)

I've been asked by a number of colleagues whether SNAP is likely to have any influence on the conclave. In brief, my answer boils down to "No, but."

It's "no" because many church leaders believe nothing they could ever do would satisfy their most ferocious critics. Moreover, there's a strong taboo on allowing outside parties of any sort to influence the election of the pope.

The "but" is that many cardinals are genuinely concerned that the new pope should be perceived as having clean hands because they don't want his early days to be occupied by explaining his record on the abuse crisis. If SNAP or anybody else has the goods on one of the *papabili*, the cardinals would certainly take it seriously.

In many cases, however, the reasons given on the "dirty dozen" list for vetoing a candidate are not a charge that he was involved in abuse, either committing it or covering it up, but rather that he made insensitive or tone-deaf comments on the crisis. In some cases, those comments date back several years, and in the meantime, the cardinal has either apologized for the remark or at least qualified it. By itself, these recycled controversies probably won't be enough to put a dent in somebody's candidacy.

Vatileaks

Put the words "Vatican" and "scandal" in a sentence, and most Americans would probably presume you're talking about the clerical abuse crisis. In Rome, however, the clear winner on the scandal buzz meter is Vatileaks, with a daily round of speculation and analysis in the Italian media about its possible impact on

the looming conclave.

La Repubblica on Thursday carried an anonymous interview purporting to be with one of the leakers, asserting that the pope's butler did not act alone, that there are at least 20 men and women inside the system ready to bring other secrets to light, and that the resignation of Benedict XVI has challenged them to redouble their efforts to promote transparency.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, refused to comment Thursday on the specifics of the report, though he did appear to cast doubt on it while acknowledging that the cardinals are almost certainly discussing the leaks affair among many other issues during the General Congregation meetings.

(That portion of the press briefing brought an amusing moment when another Italian journalist basically pressed Lombardi to issue a firmer denial, saying "there are probably 30 of us in this room who could make up an interview like this at least once a day." Lombardi declined to get dragged into that intermural spat.)

Meanwhile, respected Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli reported in *La Stampa* that one cardinal on Wednesday mentioned the names of two laity suspected of being involved in the leaks scandal, asking for information on them, which prompted a response from Cardinal Angelo Sodano, dean of the college, asking the cardinals not to mention names unless they're sure.

This afternoon, one of the cardinal electors taking part in the General Congregation meetings spoke to *NCR* on background, given the informal agreement the cardinals have reached not to give interviews.

This cardinal made two points:

- Contrary to what's been reported by some media outlets, there is no strong push among the cardinals to be shown the secret report given to Benedict XVI by three over-80 cardinals on the Vatileaks affair.
- Cardinals are taking the leaks scandal "very seriously," he said, but most believe they have adequate information from the authors of the report, who are taking part in the General Congregation meetings. He said there is no "battle royale" over Vatileaks within the General Congregation and voiced suspicion that some of the media reports are intended to put "pressure" on the conclave.

In general, the fallout from the Vatileaks affair seems to have strengthened the conviction among many cardinals that governance is a key issue heading into this vote and that the next pope has to be someone with the "strength" to push through a serious reform of the Vatican bureaucracy.

[Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr.]

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