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Who woulda thunk it? The Americans are folk heroes

by John L. Allen Jr.

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Conclave 2013

Rome — Journalism 101 teaches you to put your article's bold claim at top, so people will pay attention, and then qualify it to death later if you must.

So, here's my bold claim: Against all odds, the American cardinals are emerging as the anti-establishment insurgents of the 2013 conclave.

I say 'against all odds' because it's become conventional wisdom that over the last twenty years, the goalposts within the U.S. bishops' conference have shifted to the right, towards defense of church teaching and tradition rather than accommodating secular mores.

Today's leading lights are prelates such as Cardinals Francis George of Chicago and Timothy Dolan of New York. Despite being very different men, both are 'evangelical' bishops more concerned with proclaiming the gospel than with internal church reform.

(If you think about it, by the way, the U.S. bishops inverted the sequence of the last two papacies. They elected their Ratzinger first in George, a cerebral figure who laid the intellectual groundwork for this transition, and then their John Paul II in Dolan, a swashbuckling barnstormer to take it to the street.)

American Catholics are also accustomed to thinking of their bishops as quite loyal to the Vatican, sometimes coming off as 'more Roman than the Romans.' That's certainly true when it comes to the application of church law; Americans have never quite mastered the fine Italian art of treating law as an ideal, not necessarily a description of actual behavior.

Given all that, it may be hard for Americans to think of the U.S. cardinals as leading the charge against

the Vatican's old guard, but in some ways that's precisely how things seem to be playing out.

In the days immediately after the end of Benedict's papacy, the American cardinals were among the most vocal in press interviews in insisting that governance would be a major issue in this conclave. They were hardly the only ones saying it, but the frequency with which they brought it up, and the basic coherence among them in terms of how they fleshed out what reform would look like — transparency, accountability, and more rapid response — was striking.

Famously, the Americans were the only ones to hold daily press briefings while the General Congregation meetings were going on, drawing tremendous interest not just from the American press but from a wide variety of other nationalities, especially the Italians.

When the plug got pulled on those briefings, American stock, at least in terms of public perceptions in Rome, went through the roof. They looked like the group that had their act together, who got stomped on by the *ancien régime* because the efficient and media savvy Americans were making them look bad.

For the record, the reason given for cancelling the briefings was concern among the cardinals about leaks from their General Congregation meetings. Anyone who attended those briefings at the North American College can attest, however, that the leaks definitely didn't come from there.

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As a result of these two developments, the buzz on the street in Rome is that the Americans are the most likely to rattle cages in the Vatican and clean the place up.

Now, for the necessary qualifications.

First, I'm describing how the Americans have been perceived over the last couple of weeks in the press corps, among diplomats, in religious houses and clerical residences and other ecclesiastical venues in Rome. Whether the American cardinals actually see themselves leading a guerilla uprising is an entirely different matter.

In addition, admiration for the American initiative in holding press briefings hasn't been universal. Italian writer Marco Tosatti today called it an overly "muscular" approach, and said it was "an error of prudence and sensitivity."

Second, it's not clear if any of this actually tips the scales in any significant way in favor of an American pope. The consensus at the moment seems to be don't count it out, but don't hold your breath.

That said, I had the semi-surreal experience this morning of chatting with a couple of reporter colleagues, one Italian and one from Latin America, and competing to see who could come up with the best sound-bite for the profile of the U.S. cardinals at the 2013 conclave:

- "Conservative progressives?"
- "Post-modern traditionalists?" (mine)
- The "Affirmative Orthodoxy lobby?"

(That last one came from the Italian, but he was cheating because it's a phrase I coined with respect to Benedict XVI, and later applied to Dolan.)

Whether the American cardinals are instrumental in electing a pope committed to good government ? and, for sure, whether that pope is one of them ? very much remains to be seen.

But for now, a fascinating bit of subtext from the 2013 conclave is that in the run-up to the event, observers frustrated with business as usual in the Holy See basically have hailed them as folk heroes.

To use that quintessential American interrogative: Who woulda thunk it?

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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