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Papabili of the Day: The Men Who Could Be Pope

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Conclave 2013

John Allen is offering a profile each day of one of the most frequently touted papabili, or men who could be pope. The old saying in Rome is that he who enters a conclave as pope exits as a cardinal, meaning there's no guarantee one of these men actually will be chosen. They are, however, the leading names drawing buzz in Rome these days, ensuring they will be in the spotlight as the conclave draws near. The profiles of these men also suggest the issues and the qualities other cardinals see as desirable heading into the election.

Read all of John Allen's papabile of the day stories here.

Attentive readers will notice a subtle shift in the headline today, from *papabile*, singular, to *papabili*, plural. That's because I'm treating three papal candidates in this piece, not just one. We're going to examine the prospects of the three Americans generally considered the most plausible contenders: Cardinals Timothy Dolan of New York, Sean O'Malley of Boston and Donald Wuerl of Washington.

I'm assuming my readers don't need a whole lot of biographical background on these three figures. What's critical is to understand why each might become pope, and why they might not. In this last installment of the "Papabile of the Day" series, that's precisely what we'll explore.

To begin with, let's make three broad points.

First, there's a "prophet without honor in his own land" dynamic when it comes to thinking about a prelate from one's own country becoming pope. We know them too well, so their defects and failures, their humanity, loom larger. Most of the cardinals currently sizing one another up, however, don't have that kind of intimate familiarity.

Second, the old taboo about electing a "superpower pope" has less force in 2013, even if it's not completely disappeared. It's a new geopolitical ballgame in the early 21st century, and the United States is no longer the lone superpower.

Third, the only reason I don't include Cardinal Francis George of Chicago among the American contenders is age (76) and the fact he recently went through a cancer scare. On the back of a pope who resigned citing age and exhaustion, concerns about long-term health are a significant impediment. Otherwise, George would be a serious runner ? he's got the intellect, the languages, and the administrative experience to appeal to many voters.

The issues

Heading into tomorrow's conclave, it seems clear that the 115 cardinals who will cast ballots have three primary items on their wish-lists for the next pope:

- A man with global vision, especially someone who can embrace the two-thirds of the 1.2 billion Catholics in the world who live outside the West, a share that will be three-quarters by mid-century.
- A pope for the "New Evangelization," meaning someone who has the capacity to arouse missionary fervor in Catholics and to reach out to the wider world, inviting people to take a new look at the church.
- A strong governor willing and able to bring 21st century best practices of business management to the Vatican, making the place more transparent and efficient, and holding people accountable for poor performance.

Let's now turn to how the three American contenders and see how they measure up.

Advertisement

Cardinal Timothy Dolan, 63

Two of the most respected Italian *vaticanisti*, Andrea Tornielli and Sandro Magister, have both reported that Dolan has strong support heading into the conclave, so one has to take his candidacy seriously. Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the over-80 former president of the Italian bishops' conference, has let it be known that he likes Dolan a lot, and Ruini still exercises considerable influence among several of the Italian voters.

What's the case for Dolan?

First, he's evangelization on steroids. He's easily the most charismatic, media savvy and engaging personality among the 115 cardinals who file into the Sistine Chapel. If he weren't a clergyman, Dolan probably would have been a U.S. Senator, given his people skills and gift for gab.

One buzzword among cardinals is the need for an energetic pope, and from personal experience of watching the man work I can say this: Tim Dolan has no "off" switch.

Second, he's got a reputation for having some steel in his spine. Beneath the easy smile and self-deprecating humor, he's at peace with himself, comfortable in his own skin, and not given to agonizing over tough decisions. Other cardinals may look at him and think, "There's a man who wouldn't be crushed by the burdens of this job."

Third, Dolan is seen as a staunch conservative, appealing to traditionalists, with a pragmatic and open working style, appealing to moderates. He tries to keep his friendships green among other bishops, which gives him appeal among various currents.

Fourth, there's an anti-establishment mood among many cardinals, a desire to shake things up in the Vatican, and Dolan may seem the most likely American to actually get that done. (That was the linchpin of Magister's argument.)

Here's the case against Dolan.

First, he may simply be "too American." His boisterous personality may be too great a shock to the system for some cardinals, who may admire him as an emissary of the faith in New York, but who would find him a bit much in Rome.

On a related note, some cardinals may worry that having such a dominant personality in the papacy would overshadow other bishops and layers of authority. To repeat a line I've used elsewhere, if they elect Dolan 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.

Second, Dolan may not pass the "global vision" test. He hasn't spent any significant stretch of his career overseas except for his seven years as rector of the North American College in Rome from 1994 to 2001, and it's basically an American colony. He's got some Italian and Spanish in addition to English, but that's about it.

On the other hand, Dolan has been leading the charge among the American bishops to take a more aggressive line against anti-Christian violence and persecution around the world, including in the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia. Cardinals from those regions may look at Dolan and see the figure most likely to deploy the political capital of the papacy effectively to come to their aid.

Third, Dolan has no experience working inside the Vatican, and some cardinals may worry that he'd be overly dependent on the old regime, especially in the initial stages of his papacy. For what it's worth, some observers in New York say that Dolan is such an *ad extra* leader, focused on engaging the media and the political issues of the day, that he hasn't really wrapped his hands around the administrative dimension of the archdiocese.

When Dolan came to Rome in February 2012 to get his red hat, he drew a look as a possible contender, and the central question then was: "Are the other cardinals ready for cowboy pope?" It remains the question now.

Cardinal Sean O'Malley, 68

If these were the old days, when the people of Rome simply chose a pope by acclamation and threatened

to storm the castle if they didn't get him, O'Malley probably would be a lock. He's become the public darling in the run-up to the conclave, the cardinal that ordinary people just can't stop talking about. His plain brown Capuchin habit, his beard, his smile and humility, have stirred a sort of Roman love affair.

O'Malley's reputation as a reformer on the church's sexual abuse crisis has also earned him credibility, especially in a conclave occurring just after Cardinal Keith O'Brien's resignation in Scotland after acknowledging sexual misconduct.

Here's the case for O'Malley.

First, he may not be the energizer bunny that Dolan is, but in his quieter, gentler way, he's just as compelling an evangelizer. His personality shatters the usual anti-clerical stereotypes, projecting an image of genuine spirituality and simplicity. He's also got a track record of drawing people into the life of faith; Boston had maybe 15 seminarians when O'Malley took over in 2003, while today it has 70.

Second, he clearly passes the global vision test. He's spent stretches of his career in Latin America and in the Virgin Islands, and has deep pastoral experience working with Latino Catholics. He speaks Spanish, Portuguese, German and Italian fluently, in addition to English.

Moreover, O'Malley's membership in the Capuchins also gives him status as a citizen of the world. As one Italian Vatican-watcher put it, "When he goes to Assisi, people don't see him as an American but as a friar."

The conventional wisdom is that O'Malley profiles as the "least American" of the three American candidates, which is understood to be a good thing.

Third, O'Malley arguably has more experience dealing with the fallout from the sexual abuse scandal than any other prelate in the Catholic church. Since recovery from the crisis has to be near the top of the next pope's to-do list, that's a huge selling point.

Granted, there are American critics who regard his record as mixed, but the early media storyline on O'Malley would probably still be, "Reformer elected Pope."

Yet there are question marks too.

First and most basically, many of the cardinals want a strong governor, and there's doubt about whether O'Malley is cut out for that role. As odd as it may sound, some cardinals privately think he's too nice a guy to be pope ? too inclined to give people the benefit of the doubt, too sensitive to their feelings, to make the tough decisions.

O'Malley's famous November 2004 letter, in which he confessed that "at times I ask God to call me home and let someone else finish this job," may still echo in the minds of some voters, especially in the wake of Benedict's resignation.

On the other hand, cardinals may draw the opposite conclusion: O'Malley struggled early on in Boston but seems to have gotten his legs under him, which may be precisely the right background for someone stepping into the papacy.

Second, if Dolan has little Roman experience, O'Malley has virtually zero. He's a complete outsider to the world of the Vatican, and many cardinals may not be prepared to just roll the dice and see what happens.

Third, there may be some reservations about electing a member of a religious order, especially someone

from the largest single family of religious in the church, the Franciscans. Not only would other orders perhaps wonder if the new pope will play favorites, but some cardinals have traditionally felt that the papacy ought to go to someone from the diocesan clergy, seeing it as better preparation for the job.

Fourth, the strongest "Ratzingerians" in the College of Cardinals would probably be more inclined to see Dolan as a kindred spirit. While O'Malley is a man of unquestioned orthodoxy, he's generally not terribly ideological, and often comes off as a moderate because of his pastoral style.

All that said, if the cardinals are inclined to give an American a look but find Dolan just a bit too over the top, O'Malley could be a beguiling option. If nothing else, this week has taught the cardinals that O'Malley is clearly suited to be the Bishop of Rome, because the Romans themselves are clamoring for him.

Cardinal Donald Wuerl, 72

Though he hasn't drawn anything like the buzz surrounding Dolan and O'Malley, there's a good case that by the three criteria sketched above, Wuerl is actually the most compelling American candidate.

First, he studied at both the Gregorian University and the Angelicum, then spent an additional ten years in Rome from 1969 to 1979 as the priest-secretary to Cardinal John Wright, who was prefect of the Congregation for Clergy. Rome is the crossroads of the entire Catholic world, so that experience exposed Wuerl to bishops, theologians and lay leaders from all over the map, giving him a cosmopolitan outlook on the church.

Needless to say, Wuerl also speaks Italian fluently and would be well-suited to be Bishop of Rome.

Second, Wuerl got to the party on the "New Evangelization" early, giving lectures and publishing books on the subject even before it attained buzzword status. Benedict XVI named him the *relator*, or general secretary, of last fall's Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, reflecting his profile as a global leader in the effort to revive the church's missionary efforts. Wuerl has long been a leader in catechesis, and many cardinals may see him as a natural choice to pick up where Benedict XVI left off.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Wuerl has a track record as an efficient governor, someone able to broker consensus and get things done. He's also seen as more or less the dead center of the U.S. bishops' conference, leaning neither to the left nor the right, which means that bishops of differing outlooks trust him.

Wuerl's performance at last fall's synod earned good reviews, with bishops reporting that he intervened at critical moments to break logjams and keep the meeting on track.

As an old Roman hand, Wuerl is arguably the American best suited to actually get control of the Vatican bureaucracy, bringing it into better alignment with 21st century standards of business management.

Fourth, although Wuerl faces the same criticism on the sexual abuse crisis as most American bishops, he was one of the first to move aggressively. Back in 1988, when he was the Bishop of Pittsburgh, he removed an accused abuser named Anthony Cipolla from ministry. Cipolla appealed to a Vatican court and won an order of reinstatement, but Wuerl refused to back down and pushed Rome to take another look, eventually prevailing. Not only does that make Wuerl look proactive, but it also raises his stock as someone who can move the ball inside the Vatican.

Yet, as always, there are also potential drawbacks.

First, because there's not been much public clamor around Wuerl as a possible contender, many cardinals may not be heading into the conclave having thought much about him. Facing such a momentous choice, many cardinals may not be inclined to take a chance on someone they haven't vetted fairly carefully.

Second, Wuerl has neither the in-your-face charm of Dolan nor the Capuchin appeal of O'Malley. He's often seen as more effective behind the scenes than on a big public stage. In fact, some cardinals may be inclined to think that if they're going to shatter the Vatican's glass ceiling for Americans, Wuerl would be a better bet as the first American Secretary of State rather than pope.

Third, Wuerl's Roman experience could be a double-edged sword. He's spoken fondly about his remembrances of how things worked in the Vatican under then-Archbishop Giovanni Benelli, the ultra-powerful substitute under Paul VI. To cardinals who find themselves in an anti-establishment mood, Wuerl may strike them as a bit too attached to the old ways, simply a more efficient form of business as usual.

It's striking that while many other cardinals have spoken strongly about governance and reform of the Roman Curia as voting issues in this conclave, Wuerl generally has played down those factors in favor of the spiritual and missionary imperatives facing the next pope. That may cause some cardinals to wonder if he's as committed to a housecleaning as they are.

Fourth, Wuerl himself has said "I'm not sure that it would be the wisest thing" to elect an American pope, because "a pope from the superpower would probably have a lot going against him when he's trying to present a spiritual message to the rest of the world."

That could be seen, of course, as simply a humble way of deflecting attention, but some cardinals may also read it as Wuerl harboring doubts about whether he'd be able to pull it off.

The bottom line

Where does all this leave us vis-à-vis an American pope?

On Feb. 28, the day of Pope Benedict XVI's last General Audience, I asked a cardinal who had been in the 2005 conclave, and who's widely seen as a kingmaker this time around, what he thought about the prospects for an American. His response: "Only if none of the strong candidates going in look like they're going to get to two-thirds," he said.

That's probably still about right. But in a conclave in which there's real doubt about whether the most talked-about candidates can actually cross that magic threshold of 77 votes, everything may be on the table.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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