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No direction signaled for new pope at cardinals' Mass

by Dennis Coday by Joshua J. McElwee

Conclave 2013

Rome — If the 115 cardinal electors were hoping to receive marching orders in the final hours before they enter the conclave and begin to elect a new pope, they must have been disappointed in the homily at Tuesday morning's Mass.

Following Pope John Paul II's death in 2005, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's extended homily claiming modern society had allowed a "dictatorship of relativism" was thought to have sealed his case for election as Pope Benedict XVI.

Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the dean of the cardinals, had the chance to deliver a similar homily Tuesday as the final advice the church's cardinals would receive publicly before sealing themselves off from the world Tuesday afternoon, but delivered instead a fervent appeal to charity and unity.

In a 10-minute address, Sodano did not mention church governance or the scandals among the Roman Curia that have been in the spotlight in the weeks following Pope Benedict's resignation Feb. 28.

Instead, Sodano, an 85-year-old Italian unable to vote because of his age and tainted by mishandling of the clergy sex abuse crisis, focused on the church's social teaching, asking for a pontiff who would focus on the "mission of charity" with a "generous heart."

Quoting from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, the second reading of those chosen specifically for the Mass, Sodano said he wanted to make "a strong appeal for church unity."

"Each of us is ... called to cooperate with the Successor of Peter, the visible foundation of such an ecclesial unity," he said.

Tuesday morning's Mass was essentially the last time the cardinals would be seen in public until the announcement of their election of a new leader of the Roman Catholic church hours or days later.

On Tuesday afternoon, the cardinals will solemnly process into the Sistine Chapel. After formally removing all nonelectors from the chapel with the proclamation of the Latin phrase "*Extra omnes*" -- "Everybody out" -- they will swear oaths of secrecy and cast their first ballot for the new pope.

Few expect the first ballot to produce a winner, but it will likely establish a slate of candidates for the four-day casting of ballots that will begin Wednesday.

While no election of a Roman pontiff has taken longer than three days since 1922, Chicago Cardinal Francis George said Monday this conclave might last through Friday or even into Sunday.

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Colleen Dolan, director of communications and public relations for the Chicago archdiocese, said Tuesday that George had told her the day before he thought "it was possible" the conclave could go for several days, even into the mandatory break for a day of prayer Saturday.

Church law mandates that following three days of balloting, through Friday in this case, the cardinals must take a day of prayer and reflection before continuing the process.

According to Dolan, George had indicated "there are a lot of candidates" and it could take some time for the cardinals to come to consensus.

Italian newspaper reports, known for unsubstantiated but specific claims on how cardinals are planning to vote, said Tuesday morning that in the first ballot that afternoon, 30 to 50 votes could go to Cardinal Angelo Scola, the current archbishop of Milan.

A two-thirds majority of the cardinal electors is needed to elect a pope -- this time, 77 of 115.

Many here, following lead of the Italian press, are calling this "a race with four horses." Scola is said to be in post position, with Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Brazilian Cardinal Pedro Odilo Scherer and at least one American following.

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan seems to be gaining supporters, the Italian newspapers say, but Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl is a possible compromise candidate should the cardinals be unable to find a pope in the first few rounds of balloting.

The Vatican bureaucracy, known as the Roman Curia, has been the subject of sustained criticism in the 10 meetings, or general congregations, the cardinals have met in over the last week.

Cardinals, especially those from outside the Curia, have been said to be looking for papal candidate who would focus on the church's central government, especially following the trial last year of Pope Benedict's butler for leaking sensitive church documents.

Other cardinals, according to Italian media reports, have defended the Curia and worked to put in place a candidate who would allow the Curia to make some reforms while mostly carrying on with business as usual.

Immediate speculation following Sodano's homily was that the cardinal may be trying to align himself with members of the Curia who are trying to engineer the election as pope of a Latin American cardinal.

A Latin American, the speculation goes, might be seen as significant in terms of global appeal, but also might be less apt to revamp current Vatican structures.

Usually, Scherer is the Latin American in question: From 1994 to 2001, Scherer worked in the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops, the Vatican office responsible for recommending to the pope candidates for bishops' seats around the world.

The emphasis Sodano placed on the church's social teachings in Tuesday's homily could point to how important those teachings have historically been in the developing world.

"The last popes have been builders of so many good initiatives for people and for the international community, tirelessly promoting justice and peace," Sodano ended his homily. "Let us pray that the future pope may continue this unceasing work on the world level."

For some, that language could be read as a way of saying that the Vatican bureaucrats, of whom Sodano is a part, would support the social justice agenda a Latin American might bring to the papacy.

Sodano's homily drew on the special readings for the Mass, which came from Isaiah, Paul's letter to the Ephesians and the Gospel of John.

The reading from Ephesians focused on the role of Christians in the Body of Christ, saying some are given the gift of apostleship; some, prophetic ministry; some evangelization; some pastorship.

The Gospel, taken from John's 15th chapter, presents Jesus laying down the greatest commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you."

The readings were proclaimed in English, Spanish and Italian. The Mass, which lasted more than an hour and a half, also included petitions in several languages, among them French, Swahili, Portuguese, Malayalam and German.

[Dennis Coday is *NCR* editor. Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. *NCR* senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. contributed to this report.]

Following is Sodano's full homily, as provided in a working translation from its original Italian by the Holy See's press office.

Cardinal Angelo Sodano's homily at the Mass for election of a new pope by joshua_mac8430

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