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Dolan's papal potential stems from his message, one the hierarchy wants to hear

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

Conclave 2013

An American cardinal's name keeps making unlikely appearances on short lists for possible pope. And there's a reason why New York's Timothy Dolan suddenly finds himself in such lofty company: He is offering Vatican hierarchy a message they are most eager to hear.

While most Vatican observers consistently downplay the chances of an American becoming pope, Dolan's name (along with Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley) won't fully go away, either. Insiders cite Dolan's cheerful avuncular demeanor, his politician's charm with crowds and common folk. They are attracted to Dolan's style, because it is a style that signals no shift in substance.

Dolan has said this himself many times: The church does not need a new message; it needs better, more modern messengers. A *New York Times* report from Rome quotes Dolan on church doctrine: "Let's perhaps work on a way to wrap it in a more attractive way."

And in March 2012, the newly appointed cardinal had this to say to a gathering of diocesan public policy specialists in New York, again from the *New York Times* and quoted by *NCR*:

Cardinal Dolan said that the prelates, though, might not be the church's most persuasive advocates. He told a story about bishops hiring an "attractive, articulate, intelligent" laywoman to speak against abortion and said it was "the best thing we ever did," adding, "In the public square, I hate to tell you, the days of fat, balding Irish bishops are over." Instead he emphasized the role of the laity. While priests and bishops "stick to principles," he said, "we leave a lot of the messiness of politics up to you."

Dolan would certainly "shake up" the Vatican in appearances: You could see him zipping around Rome, elbowing his way into a local bar and asking the innkeeper to find a Yankees game on the tube, then happily settling in for a soccer match with A.C. Milan. But the message on key social and sexual issues that have divided the church and turned away sections of the laity would remain.

The church has tried this, in a certain way, with Pope John Paul II -- a charismatic figure who was a giant on the world stage at a time of remarkable change. For 25 years, he kept the church relevant in every corner of the globe, everywhere he went. He created admirers among believers and nonbelievers. But he left a church divided, one that could not be pulled together by the mere force of his personality and his desire to do good.

I remember seeing John Paul at the Vatican in the late 1980s, early on in his papacy. I stood with a friend in the middle of a crowded St. Peter's Square, surrounded by squadrons of young Americans, thrilled to be in the presence of the best-known man in the world. But when I asked them about issues like contraception and celibacy and women in the church, the young Americans could not be further from the man they had come to see. He did not change their minds, and when he was gone, my guess is their link to the church was gone, too. All they were left with were the rules that made too little sense in their lives.

The Dolan choice has an understandable seduction to a tired and weary hierarchy who would just like a smiling face and a ready laugh when they look to the Holy See. But without real change -- well, nothing changes.

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