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Wednesday looms as 'Super Tuesday' for 2013 conclave

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NCR Today

Conclave 2013

Rome — Yesterday, I said on CNN more than once that the first ballot of a conclave is the New Hampshire primary of the race for the papacy. After endless speculation and taking stock of candidates, it's the first real test of strength, the first indication of who might actually be in a position to be elected.

If yesterday was New Hampshire, then today is Super Tuesday.

Granted, analogies to secular politics are always inexact when applied to the Catholic church. Yet as Cardinal Velasio De Paolis of Italy said on his way into the Casa Santa Marta yesterday morning, the election of a pope is both "a spiritual and a political act." Anyway, imagery drawn from political life is sometimes the only tool we have to explain what's happening to the outside world.

Here's why Super Tuesday works as a metaphor for where things stand today, even if it is actually Wednesday on the calendar.

Rather than one ballot, today could bring as many as four, depending on whether or not someone gains a two-thirds majority and is elected pope before things go that far.

Those four rounds of voting loom as the make-or-break test for whoever emerged yesterday as the early front-runner or front-runners. If one candidate continues to gain momentum and appears to be headed to 77 votes, it could be the knockout blow Super Tuesday is designed to deliver in American primaries, allowing one candidate to take control of the race and avoiding gridlock down the stretch.

Just as in American politics, however, Super Tuesday doesn't always work as advertised. Sometimes the results are mixed, and that's when things can get interesting.

In the second conclave of 1978, the New Hampshire phase in the early rounds of voting clearly identified two powerhouse candidates, Cardinals Giovanni Benelli and Giuseppe Siri. That conclave's Super Tuesday, however, made it clear neither man was going to cross the two-thirds threshold. At that stage, the cardinals were forced to look for an alternative, and they found Karol Wojtyla of Krakow, Poland, who took the world by storm as Pope John Paul II.

The bottom line is that if today fails to deliver a pope, all bets are off in terms of who might step out on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica wearing white.

There's a sense in which a surprise outcome might be the logical conclusion of a story arc that began just over a month ago with Pope Benedict XVI's resignation announcement. Given that a massive shock set this process in motion, it might be poetic justice if its conclusion delivered another one.

Whether that's the way things may play out should be a lot clearer by the end of today, when the smoke clears, literally, on the 2013 conclave's Super Tuesday.

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