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Meet the new Crown Prince of Catholicism

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 1, 2011 All Things Catholic

Wednesday may have been the peak moment of the liturgical calendar this week, as the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, but Tuesday, June 28, 2011, marked a crescendo of a different sort: The day when the informal sweepstakes leading up to the next conclave officially began.

To be clear, no health scare flared up around Pope Benedict XVI, and there?s no other reason to believe his papacy is nearing an end. (As I sometimes jokingly put it, German machinery is built to last!) Yet on Tuesday, the pontiff made a personnel move that?s not only important in its own right, but one with obvious implications for handicapping papal prospects.

On June 28, Pope Benedict XVI named the 69-year-old Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Angelo Scola, as the new Archbishop of Milan.

At one level, it?s tempting to read this as a lateral move. Venice actually produced three popes in the 20th century (Pius X, John XXIII, and John Paul I) to Milan?s two (Pius XI and Paul VI), so it?s not like Scola?s transfer to the See of Ambrose lifts him out of obscurity. Among insiders, he was already considered an ecclesial heavyweight and top-tier future prospect.

Yet Milan is, well, *sui generis*. It?s one of a handful of pace-setter dioceses, such as Paris or Westminster or New York, whose occupant automatically is a worldwide point of reference. It?s also the premier see in the Italian church, and given the special relationship between Italy and the papacy, it?s probably fair to say that most popes view Milan as among the most important appointments they?ll ever make.

As a result, Milan isn?t just a job -- it?s a unique vote of papal confidence, and a platform for global leadership. Church-watchers usually assume that when a pope sends someone to Milan, he?s pointing him out as a possible successor. Benedict XVI is no naïf; he?s aware of that calculus, which means that at a minimum, he has enough confidence in Scola to put him in a place where the papacy is a live possibility.

From now on, Scola will be the lead paragraph of every speculative piece about the next conclave, and everything he does or says will be scrutinized with one eye toward a papal election. In effect, Scola becomes the new Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, who during his own run as Archbishop of Milan from 1980 to 2002 was widely seen as the church?s premier papabile.

The fact that Martini wasn?t elected to the papacy is, of course, a cautionary tale about the hazards of prognostication. Yet it doesn?t alter the point that Martini?s words and deeds carried extra weight for two decades because of his status as a perceived pope-in-waiting, and the same thing will now be true of Scola.

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I published a profile of Scola ahead of the Milan appointment in *NCR*. For those unfamiliar with him, here?s what you should know: If you like Benedict XVI, you?ll love Scola; even if you don?t, you?ll find it hard not to be charmed. He?s an extroverted, optimistic, remarkably authentic, Italian-speaking version of the pope.

(In a rather clumsy effort to express that point, *The Telegraph* in the U.K. ran the headline, ?Pro-Vatican cardinal to head Milan church.? I know what they mean, but I can?t help asking: Who, exactly, would be the ?anti-Vatican? cardinals?)

The congruence between Scola and Benedict goes back at least four decades, to Easter of 1971, when the two men first met at a restaurant on the banks of the Danube River.

At the time, Scola was studying at the University of Fribourg, while Ratzinger had recently joined the faculty at the newly-founded University of Regensburg in Bavaria. The two men shared a passion for Catholic thinkers such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Henri de Lubac, who had helped inspire the broad progressive majority at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), but who worried afterwards that the ecclesial baby was being tossed out with the bathwater. Scola would later publish book-length interviews with both figures.

Ratzinger was a co-founder of the theological journal *Communio*, with Scola serving as the Italian editor. During the 1980s, Scola became a key consulter to Ratzinger at the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, while also teaching at the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and the Family at Rome?s Lateran University. By that time, Scola was established as an internationally recognized scholar on moral anthropology.

Another connection between Scola and Benedict runs through the Communion and Liberation movement, founded by the late Italian Monsignor Luigi Giussani. For decades, Communion and Liberation was seen as a conservative rival to the liberal establishment in the Italian church. Scola was among Giussani?s early disciples, and rumors have long suggested that Scola left the Milan seminary to be ordained in the small diocese of Teramo in 1970 because of controversy around the movement.

The legendary Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete, the public face of Communion and Liberation in the United States, met the movement through Scola in 1993. He said Scola struck him as a remarkable blend of doctrinal orthodoxy and zest for life.

?I had met lots of priests who were alive, free, spontaneous, understanding, wanting to share people?s lives in all their aspects, but they had problems with the teachings of the church,? Albacete said in a 2005 interview. ?On the other hand, I found priests who accepted the teachings of the church, but in a subservient way. They were rigid, boring and afraid.?

In Scola, however, Albacete said he found what he had been seeking.

?He was not rebelling against the church,? Albacete said. ?Yet he was the freest and most spontaneous priest I ever met.?

For his part, Benedict XVI has always had a special affection for Communion and Liberation. He saw Giussani?s deep Christological faith as an antidote to a tendency in the 1960s and 70s to turn Christianity into a

political force inspired by Marxist ideology. Signs of papal esteem are almost ubiquitous, including the fact that the consecrated women who run Benedict?s papal household are drawn from Memores Domini, a group affiliated with Communion and Liberation.

As a result of their shared history, Scola has long felt a special loyalty to Benedict XVI. When the pontiff was under fire from the global media in 2010, related to his role in the sexual abuse crisis, Scola publicly referred to those attacks as an ?iniquitous humiliation.? (Just to make sure no one missed the point, his press person sent around an English translation of the cardinal?s remarks.)

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Yet if Benedict and Scola breathe the same intellectual and theological air, they are nonetheless different personalities.

For one thing, Benedict grew up in a fairly homogenous Catholic environment in pre-war Bavaria, while the milieu in which Scola came of age was more diverse. His father was a truck driver and a Socialist, who encouraged his son to read *L?Unità*, a secular left-wing Italian daily that?s often considered fairly anti-clerical. (To this day, Scola credits *L?Unità* with introducing him to the life of the mind.)

As a young man, Scola studied under Emanuele Severino, Italy?s most important contemporary philosopher, at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan. (In the philosophical guild Severino is considered a ?neo-Parminidean,? which I?m not even going to try to define.) Over the years Severino repeatedly clashed with church authorities, and in 1970 the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared his thought ?incompatible with Christianity? because of his belief in ?the eternity of all being? -- which, among other consequences, renders the idea of a Creator God obsolete.

Despite all that, Severino recently recalled Scola as a brilliant student who earned the top marks he could award, and he warmly described various encounters with the cardinal over the years.

?He?s a man who can arouse enthusiasm, and I say this with conviction: Beyond being an intellectual of enormous ability, he has traits of simplicity and naturalness which aren?t easy to find among the men of the church,? Severino said.

(By the way, Severino brushed off suggestions that Scola?s ties to Communion and Liberation will be a problem in Milan: ?Frankly, I don?t see him closed in as the animator of a movement, with all due respect for that movement. His intellectual stature is superior, and goes beyond,? he said.)

To this day, Scola?s interests range remarkably wide. For instance, he says that by far his favorite book is the modernist novel *The Man Without Qualities*, by the early 20th century Austrian writer Robert Musil. Set amid the decline of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the book is often compared to works by Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann -- certainly not, in other words, the usual pious fare.

In terms of temperament, Scola is more of a ?hail fellow well met? than Benedict XVI. Among other things, he has a keen media savvy. Scola?s top media aide, a laywoman named Maria Laura Conte, is well-known among the Vatican press corps for her cheery and proactive style, often volunteering to make her boss available -- a striking contrast to the wariness with which many prelates and their minions view the press.

Across political and theological divides, Scola has a reputation for being un-clerical, unpretentious, and not at all aloof. In Venice, for instance, he set aside Wednesday mornings to meet anyone who wanted to see him, whether or not they had an appointment.

Over the years, Scola?s priorities as a leader have also tended to be fairly *ad extra*, meaning engaged with the world outside the church. One signature cause has been his ?Oasis Foundation?, launched in 2004 to promote solidarity among Christians in the Middle East and dialogue with the Islamic world.

To be sure, Scola doesn?t play to universally positive reviews. A prominent liberal Catholic movement in Italy, Noi Siamo Chiesa, issued a statement on his move to Milan expressing ?bitterness and disappointment among those who believe in reform of the church.?

?This appointment is a product of an imposition from on high, which leaves a large part of the diocese disconcerted,? the statement read. ?We see a bishop returning who wasn?t accepted here as a priest.?

(Given the historic rivalry between Communion and Liberation and the progressive currents in Milan under Martini, the Scola appointment is an especially bitter pill for many Milanese liberals. They seem to feel a bit like Red Sox fans when they see the American League pennant slipping away: ?Please, God, anyone but the Yankees!?)

Scola?s nomination, the statement asserted, ?confirms the scarce spirit of ecclesical communion of those who now guide the church, who want to impose a single line everywhere and at whatever cost. It?s the line of those who want to put the Second Vatican Council into a deep freeze.?

Love him or hate him, however, Scola is now firmly ensconced as the Crown Prince of Catholicism. Regardless of what might happen in a future conclave, it will be fascinating to watch how he chooses to spend that political capital in the here-and-now.

[John L. Allen Jr. is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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