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Rome notebook: Dolan's the rock star of this consistory

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 17, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- Theologically all cardinals may be equal, but in terms of celebrity appeal, some are obviously more equal than others. Each consistory, when a pope inducts new members into the church?s most exclusive club, tends to have its own ?rock star? ? that one new cardinal who is head and shoulders above everyone else on the buzz meter.

In February 2001, when John Paul II created a whopping 42 new cardinals, that rock star was Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras, a handsome, young polyglot who seemed the new face of the church in Latin America. In March 2006, Benedict?s first consistory, it was Stanislaw Dziwisz of Poland, John Paul?s longtime personal secretary, because it felt like a celebration of the late pope?s life and legacy.

This time around, the rock star of the consistory is quite obviously Timothy Dolan of New York.

To some extent, that outcome was predetermined by a couple of external forces. One is that Dolan arrives amid a high-stakes showdown between the American bishops and the White House, meaning that Dolan?s presence alone has news value. The other is that Benedict tapped Dolan to give a spiritual reflection to all the cardinals of the world in a behind-closed-doors session today, about as obvious a sign of papal favor as one could imagine.

Further, Dolan?s charm offensive comes at a particularly good time in Rome, coinciding with a mushrooming Vatican leaks scandal and perceptions of nasty in-fighting within the halls of power.

Veteran commentator Massimo Franco had a piece in *Corriere della Sera* this morning, the country?s most influential paper, noting the irony that the perennially fractious secular politics of Italy have toned down under the new government of technocrat Mario Monti, while the Vatican has heated up ? making the Vatican seem, as Franco put it, ?More Italian than Italy, and not in the best sense of the word.?

In that context, the image of a hyper-friendly new American cardinal who almost comes off as an ambassador of ?Up with People!? is, from the Vatican?s point of view, welcome relief.

Yet it?s more than just circumstance. Dolan is undeniably a force of nature, especially in a consistory in which the bulk of the other new cardinals are Vatican officials much more comfortable operating in the shadows.

While American reaction to Dolan may be conditioned by where one stands on the culture wars, enthusiasm for him in Rome and among church-watchers from other parts of the world often has little to do with the details of his political stands, of either the ecclesiastical or secular sort. Instead, it's what he seems to symbolize -- a more open, hopeful church, at ease in conversation with the wider world.

Dolan?s beaming, larger-than-life image has been splashed across the Italian press this week, generally playing up the contrast between his earthy ?regular guy? persona and the Italian stereotype of the stuffy ecclesiastical prince.

Panorama, a popular newsmagazine, is typical. It ran a feature on Dolan under the headline, ?A cardinal faithful to the church and to baseball,? with a photo of Dolan holding a Mets jersey.

On a less frivolous note, Italian Vatican analyst Paolo Rodari told *Panorama* that Dolan is ?one of the best interpreters of the Ratzingerian dream of a new evangelization, capable of expansion above all in the secularized West.?

You don?t need a Ph.D. in Vaticanology, however, to pick up on the buzz that surrounds Dolan. Rome is crawling with roughly 1,000 New Yorkers, scattered across four hotels in and around the Vatican. (Dolan, of course, made a point of visiting those hotels to say hello on Wednesday and Thursday evenings.) Press interest in his public events has dwarfed the draw of the other new cardinals, even when there?s virtually no promise of actual news.

Yesterday, for instance, Dolan dropped by Vatican Radio in the morning to tape his regular weekly radio program in New York, heretofore called ?A Conversation with the Archbishop,? now rebranded as ?A Conversation with Cardinal Dolan.? His guests were new Cardinal Thomas Collins of Toronto, and Italian Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications.

This was not a hard-hitting, ?Meet the Press?-style policy debate; mostly, Dolan and his guests talked about the spiritual significance of the Masses they?re celebrating, Collins? emphasis on *lectio divina* (a spiritual approach to the Bible), and so on.

Yet a bevy of journalists camped outside Vatican Radio, and some made their way upstairs to a room outside the studio, just to catch a glimpse of Dolan doing his thing.

Both before and after the show, Dolan made himself available to print reporters who wanted to ask about news of the day, and to crews from local New York stations who needed fresh soundbites. His sense of humor was, as always, on display. Asked about the speech he?s giving today, for instance, Dolan said he would ?put it to bed? last night, adding: ?I just hope I don?t put them to bed tomorrow.?

He said he was worried about delivering the speech in Italian, and when a TV reporter asked why, he blurted out: ?Because I speak it like a first-grader.?

(For the record, Dolan?s Italian actually isn?t that bad. I caught an exchange yesterday between Dolan and a Vatican official, in which they began in Italian and switched to English. I?d give the win on points to Dolan in terms of comfort level in the other language.)

Americans, of course, are by now already accustomed to Dolan?s affability, and his endless willingness to answer questions from the media ? which includes a remarkable capacity to say the same thing over and over again, yet make it sound fresh and delivered just for you each time.

For church-watchers from other parts of the world, however, this week has been a revelation.

Yesterday, I was drawn into a heated discussion among several Vatican correspondents from Italy, other European nations, and Latin America, the topic of which was: Could Dolan be pope? The consensus was that it?s an awfully long shot, but the fact of the conversation itself is telling.

A Spaniard seemed to capture the sentiment of the group, and perhaps something of the broader Roman reaction to Dolan.

?I cannot think that these cardinals are going to elect a cowboy pope,? he said ? and for once, this European

didn?t mean ?cowboy? pejoratively, but in the sense of someone who would give the Vatican a healthy jolt.

Then he added: ?But can you imagine how much fun it would be if they did??

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