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Papabile of the day: the men who could be pope

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Starting today, John Allen will be offering a profile each day of one of the papabili*, or men who could be pope. The old saying in Rome is that he who enters a conclave as pope exits as a cardinal, meaning there's no guarantee one of these men actually will be chosen. They are, however, the leading names drawing buzz in Rome these days, ensuring they will be in the spotlight as the conclave draws near. The profiles of these men also suggest the issues and the qualities other cardinals see as desirable heading into the election.*

By consensus, there's no slam-dunk, take-it-to-the-bank favorite heading into the next papal election, but the closest to thing to someone in pole position is probably 71-year-old Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan.

Scola breathes the same intellectual air as Benedict XVI, coming out of the *Communio* theological school co-founded by the young Joseph Ratzinger in the period following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). As a young theologian himself, he published book-length interviews with Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

During his college years, Scola met the famed Italian Fr. Luigi Giussani and became part of his Communion and Liberation movement. Of late, Scola has tried to put some distance between himself and the *ciellini*, as the center-right movement's members are known, especially because several leading Italian politicians identified with it have been engulfed in corruption scandals.

Still, in Italian ecclesial politics, Scola is inextricably linked with the movement, which cuts both ways -- some deeply admire Communion and Liberation; others, not so much. The linkage with Scola was solidified amid the Vatileaks scandal, which included a letter from Giussani's successor to Pope Benedict XVI in March 2011, suggesting that the previous two archbishops of Milan had fostered a critical stance toward some aspects of church teaching and that Scola was the best candidate to take over.

Intellectually, Scola's area is moral anthropology, a subject he taught at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at Rome's Lateran University before taking over as rector.

The case for Scola goes like this.

First, he's Ratzinger but with a better popular touch. He's comfortable with the media, often better off-the-cuff than when he sits down and writes a speech. His texts can sometimes be dense, but his spontaneous commentary is accessible and informal with a good dose of humor.

Second, as an Italian, he knows the lay of the land in terms of Vatican politics. Since finding someone who can take control of the Roman Curia is a perceived priority among many cardinals, that's a clear plus.

Third, Scola has extensive pastoral experience, leading both the archdioceses of Venice and Milan. He's not a

career bureaucrat, and several cardinals have already publicly said they want a pope with real experience in the pastoral trenches.

Fourth, Scola launched the "Oasis" project back in 2004, designed initially to support Christians in the Middle East, but it's grown over time into a platform for dialogue with the Muslim world. Since relations with Islam are considered a major challenge for the next pope, Scola's background is another advantage.

Now for the case against Scola.

First, as an Italian, he gets swept up into the tribal rivalries of the Italian ecclesiastical scene. There are still some Italian prelates wary of Communion and Liberation, seeing it as already too powerful, and who might be reluctant to vote for a "*ciellino* pope."

It's important to understand that for the most part, these Italian divisions have little to do with ideology or competing visions of the church, though there are some such differences -- for instance, the circles around the former president of the Italian bishops' conference, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, are conventionally seen as slightly more conservative than those around the incumbent, Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco. For the most part, however, the contrasts are more determined by personal relationships and networks of patronage.

Second, since Scola is a dedicated Ratzingerian in terms of intellectual outlook, those who believe the next pope ought to take a somewhat different approach, or at least have a somewhat different sense of priorities, might see him as a bit too much continuity.

Third, some cardinals believe the solution to the Vatican's perceived management problems is not to elect another Italian, but to break the Italian stranglehold on the place's internal culture. For this camp, the time has come to realize the long-promised "internationalization" of the Vatican begun under Paul VI and carried forward in fits and starts by both John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Fourth, Scola may simply suffer from having been in the spotlight too long, allowing opinions about him to crystallize, and making it difficult for a sudden consensus around him to form.

How notorious is Scola as a possible papal successor?

Consider that another of the documents to make the rounds amid the Vatileaks affair was an anonymous memo, written in German and passed along to Benedict XVI by a retired Vatican cardinal, which was touted in the Italian media as proof of a sensational "plot to kill the pope." It purported to relay private remarks by Cardinal Paolo Romeo of Palermo, Sicily, during a trip to China, in which Romero allegedly said Benedict XVI would be dead within the year and replaced with a top Italian cardinal.

The name of that cardinal? Angelo Scola.

In a race in which too much publicity can sometimes be the kiss of death, that's probably not the kind of PR destined to help Scola's chances.

Fans, however, insist Scola has been in the spotlight for a long time precisely because he's among the most impressive figures at the senior level of the church, and that the fact that he hasn't wilted under the attention proves he's got the right stuff to be pope.

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