

French cardinal says race still wide open

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 11, 2013 NCR Today

Conclave 2013

Rome

Journalists are often derided as a fairly un-churched bunch, but yesterday the 5,000-plus reporters covering the conclave swelled the churches of Rome to catch a glimpse of cardinals saying Mass, hoping to pick up some hint of what to expect when things get underway tomorrow.

On that front, probably the most interesting insight came from Cardinal Philippe Barbarin of Lyon, France.

“Last time there was a figure with real weight, three or four times more so than the rest of the cardinals. We’re talking about Joseph Ratzinger,” the 62-year-old Barbarin said in brief comments to reporters.

“It’s not like that now. Therefore, the choice has to be made among one, two, three, four – a dozen candidates. Right now we don’t know anything, we have to wait for the results of the first ballot.”

Barbarin, who’s a sharp cookie with wide contacts among cardinals from other parts of the world, likely would not have spoken in those terms if he felt there was a consensus candidate emerging.

Though Italian news reports have suggested that Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan could get as many as forty votes on the first ballot, Barbarin’s language would suggest that Scola isn’t necessarily a slam dunk.

At the moment, the consensus seems to be that three candidates could have significant support when the cardinals cast their first ballot on Tuesday evening:

- Scola, backed by a number of Europeans and some Americans, who profiles as the best insider/outsider combination to turn over a new leaf in the Vatican.
- Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Canada, an intellectual disciple of Benedict XVI with deep ties to the Americas both North and South.
- Cardinal Odilo Pedro Scherer of Brazil, who would bring on board many Latin Americans as well as Vatican veterans who remember him from his stint at the Congregation for Bishops.

Many Vatican-watchers also believe that a couple of U.S. cardinals could be in the running: Timothy Dolan of New York and Sean O’Malley of Boston. Early ballots may quickly eliminate one of them, or they could continue to split the vote for an “American pope” longer into the process.

If none of these figures seems capable of getting to 77 votes, representing a two-thirds majority, then several more options could come into focus. Among the names drawing the most attention as possible fallback solutions are:

- Christoph Schönborn of Austria
- Malcolm Ranjith of Sri Lanka

- Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina
- Luis Antonio Tagle of the Philippines
- Péter Erdő of Hungary
- Gianfranco Ravasi of Italy

Going in, things seem to be shaping up this way. If we have a pope by Wednesday night, the best places to watch for celebrations will be Milan, Quebec City and São Paulo.

If the conclave extends longer than midday Thursday, however, then keep your eyes peeled, because the *habemus papam* party could break out anywhere.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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