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Path to the papacy: 'Not him, not him, therefore him'

by John L. Allen Jr.

Pope Francis

Rome — Two days before the conclave opened to elect a successor to Pope Benedict XVI on March 12, Cardinal Philippe Barbarin of Lyon, France, candidly confessed to reporters gathered outside his titular church in Rome that the voters didn't have their act together.

"There are three, four, maybe a dozen candidates," Barbarin said, leaving observers with the impression of a crowded field lacking a clear front-runner and perhaps a long and difficult election ahead.

As things turned out, Barbarin needn't have worried.

It took the cardinals just five ballots to settle on Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Argentina, as the next pope, despite the fact that most of them said afterward they hadn't gone in thinking of him as the obvious choice to be their next boss. Bergoglio had been the runner-up eight years ago, but most cardinals said this time they wanted an "energetic" pope, and a 76-year-old with one lung didn't seem the most obvious candidate.

Trying to make sense of the result for themselves, cardinals who spoke to *NCR* on background in the days after the conclave said what turned this long shot into a consensus candidate was the intersection of three basic forces:

- A strong anti-establishment mood, which expressed itself as an informal veto against any Italian candidate and any candidate out of the Roman Curia;
- A desire to elect a pope who could put a face on the burgeoning Catholic footprint in the developing world, which in practice meant the hunt was on for a Latin American;
- A process of elimination inside the conclave that one cardinal described this way: "Not him, not him, and not him, therefore him."

A result made in the Sistine

After the cardinals left the Casa Santa Marta, the Vatican hotel where they stayed during the conclave, *NCR* spoke to five on background about the dynamics that carried Bergoglio to the papacy. None violated their oath of secrecy by providing round-by-round vote totals, but they were willing to describe what happened in more general terms.

Prior to the opening of the conclave Tuesday, it wasn't just bookies and journalists who had a hard time taking Bergoglio seriously -- the cardinals themselves weren't really taking him seriously, either.

"I certainly didn't go in thinking it would be Bergoglio, and no one I was talking to thought it," one cardinal told *NCR*. "It's something that emerged inside the conclave itself."

Cardinals said Bergoglio's name came up in informal pre-conclave discussions held parallel to the daily General Congregation meetings, but as a fallback possibility.

"He was always in the background, mostly because of his age," one cardinal said.

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Another said in those informal talks, Bergoglio's profile as a Jesuit known for resisting the liberalizing currents in the order in Latin America during the 1970s was a selling point.

"Maybe it will take a Jesuit to fix the Jesuits," he said, only semi-jokingly.

One cardinal added he heard fellow cardinals say Bergoglio's experience of navigating relations with Argentina's military junta in the 1970s, when he was still a Jesuit superior, could equip him to deal with other sorts of hostile governments in the early 21st century.

A pope in five ballots

On the first ballot Tuesday evening, votes were scattered across several candidates, including Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan, considered the "pole position" candidate heading into the conclave. (The Italian bishops' conference was apparently so convinced that shortly after the white smoke went up Wednesday evening, they accidentally released an email congratulating Scola on his election.)

There were also votes for Bergoglio and for another Latin American, Cardinal Odilo Pedro Scherer of São Paulo. Cardinals confirmed there was also some support for Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, currently the prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops.

By all accounts, there were no clear "blocs" supporting these candidacies. The 28 Italians were not uniformly lined up behind Scola, for instance, and the 11 Americans didn't line up uniformly behind a particular candidate either.

Cardinals say when they woke up Wednesday morning, it wasn't clear to them they'd have a pope that night, and it was even less clear it would be Bergoglio.

After two rounds of voting Wednesday morning, it had become clear that neither Scola nor Scherer were likely to cross the finish line and gain the 77 votes needed for election. At that stage, one cardinal said, the

situation seemed to be "congealing" in favor of Bergoglio, though another insisted that heading off to lunch, "we weren't sure we were going to have a conclusion" that night.

The fourth ballot, the first of Wednesday afternoon, saw Bergoglio separate himself from the pack. On the fifth and final ballot, the normal conclave dynamic kicked in as cardinals wanted to offer a unified show of support for the man destined to win. Although cardinals won't confirm specific vote totals, most reports suggest Bergoglio obtained at least 90 out of 115 votes on that final ballot.

In a session with journalists held at Rome's Irish College, Cardinal Sean Brady of Ireland described hearing the name "Bergoglio" echo over and over again as the ballots were counted during the final round, and then applause breaking out when he crossed the magic threshold of 77 votes, representing the two-thirds needed to become pope.

Shaking up the old guard

One thing that seems crystal clear is that cardinals from many parts of the world came into the 2013 conclave looking to shake up the Vatican's old guard. The reputation of the ruling elite had already been damaged by repeated breakdowns in governance over the last eight years, and took another blow in the immediate run-up to the conclave with sensational media reports that a secret dossier on the Vatican leaks affair contains analysis of an alleged "gay lobby."

Whether true or not, those reports revived memories of the disastrous leaks scandal and the perceptions of administrative disarray it created.

The drumbeat of criticism of established methods of doing business in the Holy See even came from some of the 38 curial cardinals themselves. The final General Congregation meeting on March 11, for instance, brought a testy exchange between Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State, and Brazilian Cardinal Joao Braz de Aviz, who heads the Congregation for Religious.

Bertone rose to urge the cardinals not to conduct their debates through the media, among other things citing the fact that reports of a speech Braz had given two days earlier during the General Congregation had shown up in the papers. The Brazilian took that to mean Bertone was accusing him of leaking it, and shot up to suggest that maybe the leak had come from "the organization," meaning the powers that be under Bertone.

Cardinals applauded that line, reflecting discontent with the leaks affair and more broadly with the state of things inside the Vatican.

In practice, that anti-establishment mood meant any Italian candidate was in trouble from the beginning.

"In a different conclave, Scola might have won," one cardinal said, adding that he "is obviously qualified to be pope." He came into the vote with strong support, including cardinals from the Middle East who think highly of Scola because of his Oasis project, founded in 2004 to support the Christians of the region and to engage Islam.

This time around, however, a cardinal said Scola fell victim "to a very strong bias against the Italians."

"There was a sense that the Italians aren't up to the job anymore," he said, referring to the administration of the Vatican. "They used to be so good, but lately they seem to have lost control of things."

The cardinals wanted a shake-up, and they weren't in the mood to trust an insider to deliver it. Many

thought they had voted for reform eight years by electing Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who for more than 20 years had seemed in the Curia but not of it. Because Ratzinger knew where all the bodies were buried, or so the theory went, he could be the one to get the place under control.

This time, many felt an outsider was the way to go.

By most accounts, Bergoglio helped his stock considerably with a brief speech during that final General Congregation meeting Monday morning in which he called for "purification" and warned against the dangers of "careerism."

In the careful argot of the Vatican, those are code words for serious reform. They enticed some cardinals to take a harder look at Bergoglio, who never worked a day in his life in the Vatican but who did have experience of running a complex archdiocese, as the man who might deliver that reform.

Wanting a Latin American

Although cardinals generally insist that nationality is not a voting issue and the next pope could come from anywhere, the truth is that it did matter in 2013. In the abstract, many cardinals wanted to elect a pope from the developing world, and that usually led them by a short path to point to Latin America.

For some cardinals, the church in Africa and Asia is considered too young, too unsettled, to produce a pope. Latin America, however, has more than five centuries of Catholic tradition under its belt. Further, Latin America was also an important electoral force in the 2013 conclave, with 19 voting cardinals hailing from the region.

Sources told *NCR* that several fellow Latin Americans made an active case for Bergoglio, including Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras, whose profile as a friend of liberation theology may have helped some European moderates to get on board.

In the days just before the conclave opened, Italian Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio said out loud what many of his brother cardinals were obviously thinking: "It's time to look outside Italy and Europe, in particular considering Latin America."

Several American cardinals supported the idea of a Latin American, reflecting the mushrooming Hispanic footprint in the church in the United States. Latinos now represent almost a third of the 67 million Catholics in America, and several American cardinals had dropped hints in the run-up to the conclave that a Spanish-speaking pope would be no bad thing.

Cardinals from other parts of the developing world were also enthusiastic about electing someone from south of the equator. In pre-conclave interviews, for instance, both Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana and Cardinal John Onaiyekan of Nigeria expressed support for a "Third World pope." Taken together, the cardinals from Africa and Asia represented 21 votes.

The problem, of course, is that when the cardinals file into the Sistine Chapel, they're not voting for a passport but for a man. If they wanted a Latin American, the principal question therefore was: Which one?

Last man standing

That question brings us to the final dynamic that cardinals say led to the election of Bergoglio, which one described as a "winnowing" process of eliminating the other possibilities.

As already mentioned, Scola ran afoul of a strong anti-Italian sentiment. Similarly, the other serious Latin

American candidate, Scherer, dropped out because of an equally ferocious bias against anyone tainted by association with the Vatican's old guard.

In the pre-conclave period, an influential Italian Vatican writer suggested Scherer was the preferred candidate of Cardinals Angelo Sodano, the 85-year-old dean of the College of Cardinals, and Giovanni Battista Re, the former prefect of the Congregation for Bishops and a career Vatican heavyweight. The hypothesis was based on the fact that Scherer worked under Re in the Congregation for Bishops from 1994 to 2001, making him seen, as described by another Vatican writer, "docile and bland" and therefore acceptable to the *Ancien Régime*.

Similarly, Ouellet might have been given honorary Latin American status because he comes from the New World and spent 12 years in Colombia as a missionary. Ouellet, however, has put in two stints as a Vatican official, and thus did not embody the clean break many cardinals were seeking.

Having eliminated the three early front-runners, the cardinals were forced to reach down to their B lists. As one cardinal put it, once the leading candidates in 2013 were set aside, the obvious instinct was to reach for someone who had been in the mix in 2005.

Asked what the logic for Bergoglio's selection had been, this cardinal said: "Not him, not him, and not him, therefore him."

That may seem a curious way to pick a pope. Based on the overwhelmingly positive public response to Francis so far, however, many observers may be inclined to say that however it happened, the 114 cardinals who elected Bergoglio seem to have won the lottery.

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