

Introducing a new papal candidate

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 18, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- tAs a journalist, I pride myself on trying to see things based on the facts as they stand, not as I or someone else might like them to be.

Thus whenever I get the "next pope" question, I try to stay tethered to reality, not floating long-shots that might excite one constituency or another, but pointing to figures who seem to have the best chance of actually being elected.

The problem is that when it comes to the essentially unknowable, it's tough to be confident about what "reality" actually is. There are no polls, no fundraising reports, no ad buys, nothing empirical other than "buzz" to separate serious contenders from the crowd. Recent history suggests that sometimes those perceived front-runners come through, as in Paul VI and Benedict XVI, but other times dark horses emerge, as in John XXIII and John Paul II.

This is by way of introducing a new papal candidate, who I freely confess has not been featured in any of the latest round-ups of contenders (including my own), and someone who would probably be an afterthought in most conversations in Rome about who might come next.

(For the record, there's no sign of a health crisis around Benedict which would suggest a transition is imminent. It's just that with an 85-year-old pope, the question can't help but come up.)

Before rolling out the name, let me tick off what background talks with cardinals from various parts of the world suggest they will be seeking when the next file into the Sistine Chapel:

- Someone who can get the Vatican under control, especially in light of perceived disarray highlighted by the Vati-leaks mess;
- Someone with a broad global vision equipped to lead the church in a globalized era, at a time when its greatest growth is outside the West;
- Someone with enough intellectual wattage and personal courage to defend the church against runaway secularism;
- Someone capable of advancing the "New Evangelization" by projecting a positive image of the church, either because of their media savvy or their inspiring personal story.

Accomplishing all of that at once is a tall order, but there's a cardinal waiting in the wings who could seem to fit the bill: Fernando Filoni, 66, currently prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, the Vatican's sprawling and powerful missionary department.

Filoni recently gave a lengthy interview to the prestigious journal *30 Giorni*, covering a wide variety of subjects, from the "Year of Faith", to China, to his experience as nuncio during the 2003 war in Iraq. Filoni comes off as thoughtful, cosmopolitan, balanced, and sincere, and it could be the kind of thing that propels him into the

conversation about papal candidates.

Yes, I know Filoni is an Italian and a career Vatican official, at a time when the leaks scandal hasn't done much for the stock of either group. Yes, I also know Filoni has a reputation as a reserved figure, not the kind of guy to take the world by storm.

Stay with me, and let's review how Filoni could satisfy the criteria sketched above.

First, Filoni certainly knows the inner workings of the Vatican, having served in the Secretariat of State early in his career, between diplomatic postings, and then from June 2007 to May 2011 as the all-important *sostituto*, or "substitute," effectively the pope's chief of staff. That biography is not an unmixed blessing, because Filoni was on the scene for some of the more spectacular implodings of Benedict's papacy: the cause célèbre surrounding a Holocaust-denying traditionalist bishop in 2009, for instance, and the surreal Boffo affair in early 2010.

Yet most observers place blame for those episodes at the feet of Filoni's former boss, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State. Indeed, conventional wisdom is that Bertone and Filoni, once close, had a falling out. True or not, the perception helps. To some, Filoni could seem perfect — an insider, yet not terribly complicit in the present malaise.

Much the same thing could be said of another former substitute, Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, currently prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches. The problem with Sandri, however, is that he served in the late John Paul years under former Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano, and thus arguably could be tied to some of the perceived failures from that period — most especially, inaction in the case of the late Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, on charges of sexual misconduct and abuse. Filoni, at least, does not carry that kind of baggage.

Second, few cardinals could plausibly claim a global vision as deep or as broad.

Consider where Filoni has served, and not as a tourist, but getting to know these cultures both at the top and at the grassroots: Sri Lanka, from 1983-85; Iran, 1983-1985, shortly after the Khomeini revolution; Brazil, 1989-92; Hong Kong, 1992-2001, where he opened a "study mission" on mainland China; Jordan and Iraq, 2001-06; the Philippines, 2006-07.

These were hardly pleasure cruises. He was in Tehran during the Iran/Iraq war, in China for the reforms of Deng Xiaoping, and most famously, in Baghdad when the bombs fell in 2003.

Now, as prefect of the Vatican's missionary department, Filoni also has developed deep contacts with the church across Africa. It's tough to name a geopolitical priority in the early 21st century — China, Islam, or anything else — which Filoni doesn't understand from the inside out.

Third, Filoni comes off as a man of faith who won't brook compromises on Catholic identity, but also someone with a deft touch in engaging forces which can be hostile to the church.

His seminary studies coincided with Vatican II, and his episcopal motto is *Lumen gentium Christus*, recalling the council's dogmatic constitution on the church. In his *30 Giorni* interview, Filoni says that one of the ways he survived the upheaval of the 1970s, when he was doing graduate study, was by living in a parish rather than a college, so that he never lost contact with the practical concerns of real people, rather than getting caught up in ideological debates.

Despite his erudition, Filoni also appreciates the simple touches. For the "Year of Faith", his office is distributing a rosary with beads of different colors between the decades, representing the continents: white for

Europe, red for America, yellow for Asia, blue for Oceania and green for Africa. The idea is to encourage people to pray for evangelization throughout the world.

Fourth, Filoni may not be a media star, but he does understand how the communication business works. Among other things, one of his degrees is from Rome's *Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali*, a prestigious private secular institution, where he studied "techniques of public opinion," specializing in journalism.

Filoni's biography could also stir the world's imagination, especially his record in Iraq.

At a time when all the other Western ambassadors fled for safety, not to mention U.N. officials and even many journalists, Filoni refused, saying he couldn't abandon the local Catholic community or other suffering Iraqis.

"If the pastor flees in moments of difficulty," he said, "the sheep are also lost."

Though no fan of Saddam Hussein, Filoni had been an outspoken critic of the Western-imposed sanctions, saying "they hurt the people, not the regime." He also opposed the U.S.-led invasion, and repeats his judgment in the 30 Giorni interview: "You can't export democracy through war."

Filoni remained in the country afterwards, as Christians found themselves primary targets amid rising chaos. He refused to adopt special security measures, wanting to face the same risks as locals who didn't have access to guards and armored vehicles; he said his aim was to be seen "as an Iraqi, by the Iraqis." That choice almost cost him dearly in February 2006, when a car bomb went off outside the nunciature, demolishing a garden wall and smashing window panes, but luckily leaving no one hurt.

As a coda to that episode, after the bomb went off, a Muslim contractor showed up at the nunciature with thirty workers to repair the damage, out of respect for the solidarity Filoni had shown.

Given that Iraq is a harrowing symbol of rising anti-Christian violence, Filoni is in a unique position to raise consciousness on the issue.

Naturally, you can't be around as long as Filoni without drawing some criticism. Aside from mixed reviews for his record as substitute, some also wonder about his affection for the Neocatechumenate, a controversial Catholic movement born in Spain. Most basically, many people would probably say that Filoni's natural habitat is behind the scenes, not out front.

Yet no one is likely to perfectly incarnate all the things the cardinals may want. The longer they look at Filoni, the more they might like what they see.

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