

Rome Diary 52 / 18 April 2005

On the Eve of the Conclave, My Pick, Martini
My Preference, Murphy-O'Connor and
Some Reflections on the Meaning of It All

In the official list of St. Peter's 263 successors, 212 of them were Italians, and they owned the papacy for 455 years. Some reform-minded theologians (like the late and highly respected Jean-Marie Tillard) maintain the Italians *should* own it – on the grounds that the pope is nothing more or less than the bishop of Rome, and, therefore, the next bishop of Rome ought to be a Roman, or, at least, an Italian. In the papal sweepstakes of 1978, as you all know, two contending Italian candidates battled each other down the home stretch and let Karol Wojtyla squeeze in between them to win at the wire.

Now, according to The NY Times on Saturday April 16, a number of Italians are worried they may lose again, possibly to some Latin American cardinal who "represents" the largest bloc of Catholics in the world. ITALIANS FEEL THEY NEED THE NEXT PAPACY was the headline on Reporter Jason Horowitz's story out of pre-conclave Rome, and he explained why Italians feel that way.

"The election of another foreigner," he wrote, "will conclude a historic shift of power away from Italy" and "shatter the idea, reinforced by so many centuries of dominance, that Italians are preternaturally the best men for the job."

Horowitz quotes Vittorio Messori, who has worked as a ghostwriter for John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger. "Italians know how to do the job of pope; it's in their DNA."

An Italian scholar agrees. "Another non-Italian pope would confirm Italy's decline. It would mean Italy has lost its central role in papal succession."

Camillo Ruini, the president of the Italian bishops' conference, seems to be the leader of the pro-Italian clique in the conclave. I've heard this for years here: only an Italian can manage the Roman Curia. John Paul II didn't even try, which may or may not prove the point. But which Italian?

Dionigi Tettamanzi, the cardinal-archbishop of Milan who published a 653-page tome in 2000 that sits on a shelf in my Roman apartment, has been a leading candidate for months now, and it is just possible that the purported candidacy of the extreme-right-wing Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger has only one purpose: to make Tettamanzi look like more of a centrist than he is. A curious, almost vicious attack on Tettamanzi last week in *Inside the Vatican*, a slick, right wing monthly that has been doing almost daily reports on the Internet, would also tend to move Tettamanzi left-ward on the right-left spectrum, but I doubt that many cardinals

care to even think about such nonsense. The real reason why Tettamanzi won't carry a majority of the 115 electors present in Rome is much simpler. Tettamanzi doesn't speak English.

There is, in fact, only one Italian candidate who stands out among the 20 Italian cardinals, the stately Jesuit Carlo Martini. As I just told my friend, the Jesuit Gaston Roberge of the Calcutta Province, the Italians have to go to Martini, the only real giant in the conclave, and a man who could win votes from all the factions in the college simply because he is so respected. He is a tall, stately, almost saturnine figure in public, but a warm, entertaining storyteller to my Jesuit friends in California who had him conduct their annual retreat in 2001. Martini speaks seven languages, he is a ranking Biblical scholar, and the author of more than 36 books. He published a dialogue on atheism with the renowned Italian novelist Umberto Eco, and after he spoke to the faculty at Harvard University in the summer of 1999, they gave him a standing ovation. In Milan, where he was the archbishop for 22 years until he retired two years ago, he filled his cathedral every Sunday night with kids, who loved his homilies. Though he's not as hammy as Papa Wojtyla was, he could also be a media presence. He reached out to adults in Milan by delivering the sign off every midnight on Milan's Channel Three, and he had his own web site on the Internet.

But can he get the 77 votes he needs? The wise guys say no because he's a Jesuit, but, even in the Church of John Paul II (who created eleven Jesuit cardinals and at least 66 Jesuit bishops) that is no real drawback. (There was never a Polish pope before, either.) Others say he is "too liberal," but liberal is a relative term. There are no theological liberals in the College of Cardinals, all but three of them creations of JPJP. Would Martini shake up the Roman Curia? Possibly, and it is this fear that may keep some Curial cardinals from casting their ballots for him when the cardinals are locked into the Sistine Chapel this afternoon. Martini's enemies in the Curia have also been saying for some years now that Martini has Parkinson's. I will leave it up to the cardinals to decide whether that is malicious gossip or not. They have already seen Martini speak forcibly in one of the cardinals' secret "congregations" last Thursday (when the chair tripled his allotted minutes to allow him to drive home what he wanted to say).

I can imagine a scenario where a group of cardinals pay a call on him tonight at midnight in his Room 48 at the Casa Santa Marta to ask him what he'd do if he started fading as John Paul II did with his Parkinson's. I am certain he would say, "I'd resign. There is no good reason for a pope to hang on when he's sick." In responding this way, Martini would not only win respect. He'd also strike a blow against the kind of papolatry that was encouraged by JPJP when he clung so stubbornly to his authority as the irreplaceable maximum leader. Many of the recent pope's supporters maintained that we couldn't have a reigning pope and a resigned pope on the same planet, because this would almost be like having two

gods. In my humble opinion, only a man who believed the pope was a demi-god could say that.

For all of these reasons, if I had to place a bet today, I'd vote for Martini. In fact, when I finish this note, I think I will go to Paddy Power.com (where Martini is a 20 to 1 shot) and bet \$100 on him.

P.S. I also like Martini because the prophecy of Malachy has the next pope listed under the code "gloria olivae," the glory of the olive. I maintain that an olive has no greater glory than at the bottom of a martini glass. So my bet, not my wish, is for Martini.

My wish? For Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, the only cardinal to my knowledge who comes across like the good Pope (now Blessed) John XXIII. I knew John XXIII. Harry Luce and Cardinal Spellman once arranged an interview for me with him in August of 1962, when popes didn't give interviews (they still don't), and I spent almost an hour with him then on the eve of Vatican II. (I spin out the tale at some length in my memoir, *Clerical Error* [Continuum 2002.]

I also know Cormac. He occupies a whole chapter in my upcoming book on the making of the next pope, a project I have been working on for five years. I have had eight meetings with him and I can say that Murphy-O'Connor is like John XXIII in several ways that might prompt the cardinals to take a closer look at him, especially if the college cannot come to an early choice. Or if Cardinal Martini declines the honor (and the burden).

Cormac (who doesn't make any of the lists of potential popes in the Italian press this morning) is warm, he's gentle, and he's modest. And he wouldn't even try to fill John Paul's giant brogans. "No one can," he told me on March 9 in his study at the English College. "The next pope should be himself."

As himself, Karol Wojtyla couldn't help being everything he was, a multilingual priest-professor-poet who became the most traveled, most visible pope of all time and a fighter even to the very end, still battling, like Rocky, in the 26th round, and then in death, bringing four million people to the streets of Rome.

As himself, Cormac Murphy-O'Connor is a patient, compassionate listener, as his dad, a general practice physician, was in Reading, County Berkshire, England, when he was growing up. I have seen him with kids, modestly, have seen him modest with his fellow bishops, have heard him preach modestly, and he could be just what Christendom needs after a cyclonic papacy that lasted 26 years, five months and eleven days. I suspect Rowan Williams, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury is wondering now whether the College of Cardinals will appreciate Cormac as much as he does.

Oh, one more thing. Cormac speaks in the language that most of the people on earth can readily understand – English. The language of most international gatherings. The language of the movies. The language of the world's airlines and airports. The language of cyberspace. The language of Shakespeare and Milton and Keats, of Cardinal Newman and Gerard Manley Hopkins and Gilbert Keith Chesterton, and, come to think of it, of the twentieth century's greatest rhetorician, Winston Churchill.

John Paul II tried to speak English, but I understood his Polish-accented English about as well as I understood his Polish-accented theology.

+++

This whole conclave thing, as refined by John Paul II in 1996, is really too much. One hundred and fifteen old men paraded around St. Peter's this morning, encircled by bells and smells, uttering their very public prayers for guidance from the Holy Spirit, then, later in the afternoon, processed over to the Sistine Chapel to pray some more. They surrounded themselves with all the trappings of holiness to make up for all those centuries when the election of a pope was far from holy.

All this ceremony is, of course, a piece of ancient protocol dating back to the twelfth century. It was theater then, and it is still theater – part of what John O'Malley calls (in his *Four Cultures of the West*) "Culture Four." Liturgy belongs there. So does dance, music, song, art. Like the other three cultures (prophetic, academic and humanistic) Culture Four (art and performance) conveys meaning. I am just not too sure I like the meaning of what this papal choreography is supposed to convey. The medium is the message: this is God's Church. Therefore let us, God's vicars, handle the succession, as Cardinal Ratzinger likes to say, "vertically." We pray to the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit gives us a new pope. Everyone else should get out of the way, so we can listen to the Spirit.

Thus Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the dean of the college, made a move as soon as the cardinals could assemble for their first meetings last week to put the cardinals under a vow of silence. I was looking forward to seeing the cardinals around Rome before the conclave, consulting not only one another, but with the people of God, too. I imagined that some of that consultation would come through the press, which Pius XII once said had a duty "to enlighten and reflect public opinion." I imagined a week when the cardinals would engage the world (and not just Catholics) in an informal dialogue. If John Paul II had engaged the world in a new way, then, I thought, it was only fitting that the world engage the group gathered to pick his successor. Cardinal Ratzinger vetoed that kind of dialogue.

This didn't surprise my friend Leonard Swidler, a professor of theology for the past forty years at Temple University in Philadelphia. Swidler told me in an email

note that Ratzinger has "long leaned toward an old heresy called Docetism – that Christ was not really human, and therefore the Church is not really human either."

Ironic to accuse Ratzinger of heresy. He has been Pope John Paul's chief heresy hunter since 1982. Ratzinger, whose odds of being the next pope have been going up, the Italian press is saying, after a bravura performance during the papal funeral on Friday and a number of public speeches since then, has long urged that the Church keep focused on "the theological and sacramental sense of the notion of 'communion'" and "gradually purify it of anthropological, sociological or simply horizontal accents."

Swidler said this is just another way of saying that the Church should keep looking up to God, and not down into the muck of politics. Swidler said, "Politicking goes on at every conclave. Ratzinger just doesn't want people to know about it." Why not? Because it would show that the Church is human after all.

Does that make sense? It makes sense to most of the Americans I know. (Maybe this is just a cultural thing?) I emailed a new friend here, a Sacred Heart nun from California named Margaret Phelan, working in the Rome office of the order's superior general. (She is the sister of Gerry Phelan, a Jesuit classmate of mine from the California Province.) She emailed me back. "I know the cardinals have serious work to do, but I would think that a part of that work would include being available to the media at this moment when the entire world is focused on the Church." This is a time, she said, when the cardinals can "clarify and educate the public, and listen to the questions posed by the media. Why do the cardinals feel they have to cut themselves off from what could be the action of the Spirit working in the broader community of the faithful and of the world as a whole?"

I also emailed Richard R. Gaillardetz, Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Toledo. He said talking to the media (or not talking to the media) is only part of the problem. He said he had "no objection to the cardinals having a quiet time prior to the conclave dedicated to prayer and reflection and separated from the media. Such a time of discernment would seem more genuine, of course, if it were preceded by a genuine effort to consult the people of God regarding the needs of the Church." He said he has not heard a single cardinal talk about consulting the faithful in relation to the papal election.

Over lunch on Saturday, I asked a fine American magazine writer who is here doing stories for Beliefnet.com, if he had heard of any American cardinals who'd asked their people what qualities they wanted in a new pope. He said, "Well, they had to come over in quite a hurry."

"But, they knew the pope was fading. How about three months ago, or six months ago?"

"Maybe they thought it wasn't fitting to talk about a successor while the pope was still alive."

I laughed. "More than a year ago, I asked one of my cardinal friends in Rome if he and his colleagues ever talked about the next pope. He said, 'We hardly ever talk about anything else.'" Not fitting? Hey, it's human.

If at this moment the cardinals in conclave are now talking about the problems a new pope has to face, I'd suggest they look at someone who isn't afraid of the people out there, someone who doesn't see himself sitting at the top of the hierarchical pyramid figuring out ways of keeping the people-people in their place.

I must sound like a nut when I write things like this. I probably fit most comfortably in what O'Malley calls Culture One, the culture of the martyr and the fanatic and the reformer, with a (bad) habit of using words like "justice" and "freedom." Maybe this why I take a jaundiced view of the show today, and wonder about the continued utility of electing a vicar of Peter in this ancient manner.

Pope Paul VI once suggested a parliament of the world's bishops might do a better job. Cardinal Siri heard about that and hustled to Rome. He and the pope went back and forth for some ninety minutes. Siri said it was "like a game of ping pong." Finally, he gave the pope his best argument. "Cardinals are answerable to no one," he said, "while bishops have to account for their decisions. So they can be easily conditioned."

Paul VI looked alarmed, that public opinion could well have some sway in the election of his successor. "Very well," he said. "It will be the Sacred College and it alone that will elect the pope."

Siri took the pope's hand, kissed his ring, and fled.

No one could invent a better story to illustrate the mind-set of the hierarchical Church. In the corridors of papal power, Cardinal Siri (who had been the leading conservative candidate for pope in 1958, 1963 and 1978) could make non-accountability a clinching argument against representative government in the Church. More shocking still: that Paul VI would go along with the idea that it was better to have papal electors who were answerable to no one but God, certainly not to the people.

+++

On Saturday, at a conference sponsored by the international organization *We Are Church* (a group that fits nicely into Culture One), I heard a prophet speak

out. It was Father Tissa Balusuriya, the theologian-economist from Sri Lanka who was excommunicated for a year and thirteen days (until he was exonerated in the year 2000) for saying some outrageous things in an obscure little book about Mary. Too bad Cardinal Ratzinger was busy Saturday. He might have excommunicated Tissa all over again if he'd heard him say, "If you're black, brown or yellow, you're a second class citizen in the Catholic Church. This is no strategy for the transformation of the world which is suffering now under white domination." He said he didn't think that the leadership of any pope would change that. "We can't expect too much change from the top. The people have to organize themselves." Uh huh. Trouble is, as my Roman friend Gerardo Terzi asked me at dinner last night, "How many Catholics simply want to be told what to do?" I had to answer, "More than half. Maybe ninety percent."

But there are groups that are organizing themselves. The group called *We Are Church* met for three mornings last week, Thursday, Friday and Saturday at the Auditorium Cavour in the Piazza Adriana, hard by the Castel San Angelo, to see how they might nudge the barque of Peter one degree to the port side. On Thursday, a professor from the University of Naples, Adriana Valerio, delivered a paper that challenged the next pope (and all the bishops of the world) "to right the wrongs of centuries." She cited numerous examples of the official Church's misogyny, in its theology, in its interpretation of scripture, in its exclusion of women from any significant position in Church governance, even in its history, which, she said, has scanted women's contributions to the Church in every sphere. "The new pope," she said, "has a duty to encourage the preservation of female memory and tradition, and the uprooting of a false tradition which has made women the sources of sin and temptation and the dwelling place of evil."

Next day, Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister from Erie, Pa., a former president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, attacked John Paul II – for reversing many of the strides made after Vatican II toward equality of women in the Church. She said that a good many women had completed degrees in pastoral ministry, but, in the latter years of John Paul's reign, found themselves shut out of priest-less parishes that, she claimed, sorely needed them.

"Why," she asked, "do we have thousands of unemployed lay ministers – most of them women – unless it is more preferable to close parishes than to allow women to maintain the very lifeblood of a communal Church?" She, too, said that the new pope had to address the women's question. "It is the major issue of our time. Recognizing that can only strengthen this papacy and this Church. It can only be diminished by ignoring it."

The *We Are Church* conference drew small audiences (less than 50) but succeeded in getting a half dozen print reporters to come to their meeting. David Willey, the veteran Rome correspondent for BBC Radio did two features on them Saturday, and they also got some television coverage from Fox and CNN.

Dr. Valerio and Sister Chittister relied on more than media coverage. They tried to email their talks to a hastily-gathered list of cardinals – under the correct assumption that the cardinals were still clinging to their laptop computers. Maybe this is where the priest-people and the people-people can start meeting, in cyberspace.

Robert Blair Kaiser
Via Vitelleschi 6 00193
Rome, Italy

39-334-959-6877