

With Benedict Resigning, Can Latin American Claim Papacy?

With Pope Benedict's stunning announcement that he will resign later this month, the time may be coming for the Roman Catholic Church to elect its first non-European leader and it could be a Latin American.

The region already represents 42 percent of the world's 1.2 billion-strong Catholic population, the largest single block in the Church, compared to 25 percent in its European heartland.

After the Pole John Paul and German-born Benedict, the post once reserved for Italians is now open to all. Who gets the nod depends on the profile of the new pope that the cardinals who elect him at the next conclave think will guide the Church best.

Two senior Vatican officials recently dropped surprisingly clear hints about possible successors. The upshot of their remarks is that the next pope could well be from Latin America.

"I know a lot of bishops and cardinals from Latin America who could take responsibility for the universal Church," said Archbishop Gerhard Mueller, who now holds the pope's old post as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"The universal Church teaches that Christianity isn't centered on Europe," the German-born archbishop told Duesseldorf's Rheinische Post newspaper just before Christmas.

Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch, head of the Vatican department for Christian unity, told the Tagesanzeiger daily in Zurich at the same time that the Church's future was not in Europe.

“It would be good if there were candidates from Africa or South America at the next conclave,” he said, referring to the closed-door election in the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel.

Asked if he would vote for a non-European over a European candidate if they were equally qualified, he responded: “Yes.”

If the next conclave really is Latin America’s turn, the leading candidates there seem to be Odilo Scherer, archbishop of the huge diocese of Sao Paulo, or the Italian-Argentine Leonardo Sandri, now heading the Vatican department for Eastern Churches.

Peter Turkson from Ghana, now head of the Vatican’s justice and peace department, is often tipped as Africa’s frontrunner.

About half the cardinals who can vote are from Europe, even though only a quarter of the world’s Catholics live there. If the conclave tilts to the Old Continent, Vatican watchers say Angelo Scola of Milan is in pole position.

Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn, a former student and close ally of Benedict, is also considered a strong candidate.

Frontrunners For Now

While there are no official candidates, here are “papabili” (potential popes) the most frequently mentioned recently. The list is in alphabetical, not in order of their chances, and will probably change between now and when the conclave is held, most likely in March.

- Joao Braz de Aviz (Brazil, 65) brought fresh air to the Vatican department for religious congregations when he took over in 2011. He supports the preference for the poor in Latin America’s liberation theology, but not the excesses of its advocates. Possible drawbacks include his low profile.
- Timothy Dolan, (USA, 62) became the voice of U.S. Catholicism after being named archbishop of New York in

2009. His humor and dynamism have impressed the Vatican, where both are often missing. But cardinals are wary of a “superpower pope” and his back-slapping style may be too American for some.

- Marc Ouellet (Canada, 68) is effectively the Vatican’s top staff director as head of the Congregation for Bishops. He once said becoming pope “would be a nightmare.” Though well connected within the Curia, the widespread secularism of his native Quebec could work against him.
- Gianfranco Ravasi (Italy, 70) has been Vatican culture minister since 2007 and represents the Church to the worlds of art, science, culture and even to atheists. This profile could hurt him if cardinals decide they need an experienced pastor rather than another professor as pope.
- Leonardo Sandri (Argentina, 69) is a “transatlantic” figure born in Buenos Aires to Italian parents. He held the third-highest Vatican post as its chief of staff in 2000-2007. But he has no pastoral experience and his job overseeing eastern churches is not a power position in Rome.
- Odilo Pedro Scherer (Brazilia, 63) ranks as Latin America’s strongest candidate. Archbishop of Sao Paulo, largest diocese in the largest Catholic country, he is conservative in his country but would rank as a moderate elsewhere. The rapid growth of Protestant churches in Brazil could count against him.
- Christoph Schoenborn (Austria, 67) is a former student of Pope Benedict with a pastoral touch the pontiff lacks. The Vienna archbishop has ranked as papal material since editing the Church catechism in the 1990s. But some cautious reform stands and strong dissent by some Austrian priests could hurt him.
- Angelo Scola (Italy, 71) is archbishop of Milan, a springboard to the papacy, and is many Italians’ bet to win. An expert on bioethics, he also knows Islam as head

of a foundation to promote Muslim-Christian understanding. His dense oratory could put off cardinals seeking a charismatic communicator.

- Luis Tagle (Philippines, 55) has a charisma often compared to that of the late Pope John Paul. He is also close to Pope Benedict after working with him at the International Theological Commission. While he has many fans, he only became a cardinal in 2012 and conclaves are wary of young candidates.
- Peter Turkson (Ghana, 64) is the top African candidate. Head of the Vatican justice and peace bureau, he is spokesman for the Church's social conscience and backs world financial reform. He showed a video criticizing Muslims at a recent Vatican synod, raising doubts about how he sees Islam.

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