

Some Believe It's Latin America's Turn and that Next Pope Will Be Brazilian

Written by Newsroom

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With Pope Benedict's stunning announcement that he will resign at end of the 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% of the world's 1.2 billion-strong Catholic population, the largest single block in the Church, compared to 25% in its European heartland and is has several outstanding candidates, according to Church sources.

After Pope John Paul and German-born Benedict, the post once reserved for Italians is now open to all and in 2005 allegedly an Argentine cardinal elector (Archbishop of Buenos Aires) made it to the last round of vote.

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 Düsseldorf'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.

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"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 São 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.

Scherer, 63, is one of the world's youngest cardinals and one of the five Brazilians to participate in the conclave that will elect the new pope. Brazil has nine cardinals, but four of them are over 80 and cannot vote anymore. The new pontiff, Scherer said, will face the challenges of "postmodernity", citing a culture "without strong values and total subjectivism."

Asked if there is a chance of a Brazilian being elected pope, he said, "The others are going to decide it."

For the São Paulo archbishop the origin of the new pope is not important. "The most important consideration in the conclave," he said, "will not be if the pope comes from a place, or some place else, but if he is really the best person to lead the Church at this moment in its history."

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.

In 2005 the current Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio, a Jesuit, was summoned to

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Rome upon the death of Pope John Paul II to participate in the papal conclave as cardinal elector and as a possible candidate is believed to have lost to Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict) in the fourth decisive ballot.

Earlier, he had participated in the funeral of Pope John Paul II and acted as a regent alongside the College of Cardinals, governing the Holy See and the Roman Catholic Church during the interregnum sede vacante period. Cardinal Bergoglio remains eligible to participate in any future conclave that begins before his 80th birthday on December 17, 2016.

Catholic journalist John L. Allen Jr. reported that Bergoglio had been a frontrunner in the 2005 Conclave. An unauthorized diary of uncertain authenticity released in September 2005 further affirmed that Bergoglio was the runner-up and main challenger of Cardinal Ratzinger during the conclave. The purported diary of the anonymous cardinal claimed Bergoglio received 40 votes during the third ballot, but fell back to 26 at the fourth and decisive ballot.

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