

BACKGROUND

Conclave's three-way race: Prevost was favoured from the start

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The truth remains sealed in the report drawn up by the chamberlain and destined for the archives, which only the reigning Pontiff can authorise to be opened. This inevitable uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the ballots has, in the recent past, encouraged

operations aimed at undermining or strengthening the elected Pope in some way.

The most notable case occurred in 2005, when Limes published an anonymous cardinal elector's diary. According to this diary, Joseph Ratzinger was elected with 84 votes, only seven more than the required majority. While the talented Lucio Brunelli had no such intention when he published the diary, whoever leaked those numbers probably wanted to create the impression that Benedict XVI was a weak pope who had not been chosen by everyone, but only by a part of the Sacred College. Roberto Regoli, an expert on the subject, recalls that there are conflicting accounts of the 2005 conclave, including one that claims Ratzinger came within a few votes of receiving 100% of the votes in the fourth ballot.

Almost a month after the election of Benedict XVI, alleged behind-the-scenes stories continue to emerge about the events in the Sistine Chapel. Some people are confidently putting forward versions that often coincide with their own desires. This is a predictable 'game' when faced with the election of a figure such as Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, who is difficult to pigeonhole.

In any case, an analysis of what may have happened in the Sistine Chapel can only be made by taking into account the progress of the general congregations, the credibility of certain 'leaks' and, above all, common sense. Common sense, for example, leads us to conclude that Pietro Parolin could not have received 50 votes or even come close to this number in the first ballot. There is no doubt that the Secretary of State entered the conclave as the favourite. Had he secured such a treasure trove in the first ballot, his candidacy would have gone to the bitter end; however, this was not the case. In fact, the most reliable rumours suggest that the Venetian cardinal's performance was below expectations from the first vote.

From what we know, it seems likely that the last conclave was a three-way contest from the outset. In addition to Parolin, the names of Péter Erdő of Hungary and Prevost himself were repeatedly mentioned in the Sistine Chapel from late afternoon on 7 May. This suggests that more than half of the cardinal electors renounced the traditional first-ballot tribute vote given to their preferred candidate. They opted to write a competitive name immediately, thus formalising the three candidates in the running.

According to our sources, which will never be confirmed, the first ballot ended with 25 votes for Erdő, 25 for Prévost and 24 for Parolin. It should come as no surprise that agreement was quickly reached on some names rather than others; while the conclave itself was brief, the pre-conclave period was longer than usual. In short, there was time

to get to know each other, talk and get organised. Given this, the electors would have returned to Santa Marta knowing that Parolin's chances were slim.

Another fact that emerged on the first day of the conclave was the unity of the so-called conservatives. They were aware that they were in the minority within the College, but were determined to make their presence felt nonetheless.

Another significant factor was that Parolin's name was considered as weak as Prevost's. This came as only a partial surprise, as the Augustinian had already attracted attention during the general congregations, being named as the first choice by several Latin American cardinals and as the second or third choice by other influential cardinals. While electing the new Pope, nationality is not a deciding factor, and in the presence of a series of counterbalances derived from his history as a missionary in Peru, his US nationality ceased to be a disadvantage for the first time and became an asset. The 'American' Pope, but not too American, was seen as an opportunity to revitalise the relationship with Catholicism in the United States, which had deteriorated during Bergoglio's twelve-year pontificate, and as a counterweight to Donald Trump's cumbersome presidency.

On the evening of 7 May, the Augustinian from Chicago must have returned to Santa Marta feeling that, as Angelo Roncalli wrote at the start of the 1958 conclave, 'the water was boiling' for him. There were no objections that would have made it impossible to insist on him as there were for Parolin. With a strong track record as a pastor in the congregations, Prevost was also the only one of Bergoglio's prefects, along with Lazarus You Heung-sik, who was appreciated by conservatives. As often happens in conclaves, the first consideration was who not to elect, and the choice of who to elect then became almost natural. The convergence of votes on the American, initially given to Erdő, was most likely favoured by his fellow countrymen Raymond Leo Burke, Timothy Dolan and James Harvey.

After the initial voting round, it was inevitable that Parolin and 'his people' would step aside. By the second day, therefore, the conditions were in place for the momentum that led Prevost to secure over 100 votes in the fourth ballot, according to an interview with Malagasy Cardinal Désiré Tsarahazana. The Sacred College emerged from the Sistine Chapel more united than expected, and Leo XIV's initial actions confirmed to the electors that they had made the right choice.

After twelve difficult years, the conservatives made a flattering impression in the conclave by converging on an 'outsider' candidate who was unassailable. Perhaps Leo

XIV will now recognise this group, which has shrunk considerably during Francis's reign, by calling Erdő (or Eijk) to the Curia. It would also not be surprising if Parolin were confirmed as Secretary of State for at least the first year of the pontificate.

Let us hope that the climate of harmony that reigned in the Sistine Chapel continues to prevail in the Church. Judging by the first month of the pontificate, it seems that the cardinals in the conclave followed the advice of Albino Luciani before his election. In 1975, the cardinal patriarch said: 'A writing of St. Bernard was once used in a very curious way. This occurred during a conclave to elect a pope when the cardinals were undecided about their choice. One of them asked to speak and offered the following reflection: 'Dear colleagues, the criterion to be used at this moment has already been clearly and transparently set out by St Bernard in such-and-such a letter. It reads: If anyone is wise, let him give us good advice; if he is merciful, let him pray for us; if he is prudent, let him govern us.' Let us therefore bow down before those among us who are wise and merciful, but let us elect the one endowed with prudence.'"