

PROFILE

Tagle, the cardinal who loves casinos

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Among the names circulating as possible candidates, one that stands out is that of 67-year-old Filipino Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, a prominent prelate in the Roman Curia, but with a bloc of Asian cardinals that has grown from two in 1963 to 23 today, 20 of whom have been appointed by Pope Francis, even for very small dioceses of 1,500 souls (Mongolia).

Appointed Archbishop of Manila by Benedict XVI, Tagle was then called to Rome in 2019 by Pope Francis as Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, replacing Cardinal Fernando Filoni, who was "promoted" to Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre when he had three years left to complete his term as Prefect. Filoni was probably paying for his reservations about the agreement between the Vatican and China on the appointment of bishops, while Tagle had always been enthusiastic.

With the reform of the Curia in 2022 and the creation of the Dicastery for Evangelisation under the leadership of Pope Francis, Tagle became pro-prefect, retaining oversight of Asia, Africa and Oceania, and many dioceses in Latin America, for a total of nearly 1,200 dioceses, more than a third of the total number of dioceses in the world. The appointment of new bishops or cardinals in the areas covered by the Dicastery for Evangelisation depends largely on Pro-Prefect Tagle. In conclusion, 68 cardinals - more than half of those in the conclave - come from Asia (23), Latin America (23), Oceania (4) and Africa (18), and almost all of them have links with Tagle. It is therefore very likely that Cardinal Tagle will be a strong candidate in the first rounds of voting.

But who is Tagle? He is known for his training in the 'Bologna School', which interprets the Second Vatican Council as a 'rupture', a new beginning in the history of the Church; a new beginning that was blocked and betrayed by John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

According to Tagle, this source of renewal has been reopened with the election of Francis (see his article 'Black Week at Vatican II' in the comprehensive History of the Second Vatican Council). Tagle has never deviated from the most extreme positions of Francis, and the Philippine Bishops' Conference - unique among the world's bishops' conferences - has not coincidentally interpreted *Amoris Laetitia* as a general green light to give communion to irregular couples.

Listening to several of Tagle's speeches, there is a common thread: Tagle cries in

almost every speech, but he always cries for the suffering caused by material conditions: violence, lack of work or money, abandonment, injustice. Of course, material conditions cause great suffering, and the Church tries to alleviate them, but this is not the Church's goal; the Church's mission is to proclaim the Good News that frees the human heart from selfishness and opens the heavens, to experience the Kingdom of Heaven already, to discover God's love and providence even in the midst of suffering.

The Marxist approach does not understand that the greatest sufferings are not material but spiritual, experiencing meaninglessness or absurdity even when one has a full stomach and a secure future. This is why there are three suicides per 100,000 people in the very poor Philippines, eight times as many in rich Japan and ten times as many in very rich South Korea.

Tagle, however, does not speak of spiritual suffering, but weeps over material suffering. Asked by an interviewer who his true 'teachers' were, Tagle named the Latin American liberation theologians: Boff, Gutiérrez and Segundo Galilea; and among women, the three most extreme feminist theologians: Elizabeth Johnson, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Ruether, who preach anger and resentment.

But while he is moved by material poverty, his friendships reveal another truth. A key friendship in understanding him is that with Monsignor James Benavente, well known on the island of Guam and rector of the cathedral. Benavente is known for the luxury with which he surrounds himself, including cars, houses (three of which he bought for himself) and an entire condominium for his family, expensive restaurants and exclusive parties at five-star resorts and hotels such as the Saipan World Centre and the Makati Shangri-La in Manila. He has been the subject of several investigations for financial fraud and, according to Cardinal Filoni, the dossier on him at the Dicastery for Evangelisation is so extensive that, despite Tagle's support, he was never appointed Bishop of Guam. Tagle and Benavente were **both made Knights of the Holy Sepulchre in Manila** on the same day in 2010 by the Order's Governor General, who travelled specially from Europe.

Benavente is very close to the millionaire Calvo family, who are the main benefactors of Guam's cathedral. The Calvos own the Bank of Saipan, the main investor in the construction of casinos on Saipan (Marianas). An FBI investigation found that Imperial Pacific, the Saipan casino built by Chinese entrepreneurs with Calvo money, collected more money from gaming tables in six months in 2017 than all the casinos in Macau. Considering that the amount of money circulating in Macau is much higher than in Las Vegas, one can begin to get an idea of the scale of the business we are talking

about. The **FBI shut down the casino** on charges of money laundering.

Thanks to his friendship with the Calvos, Benavente introduced Tagle to the two big Chinese-Filipino families that control much of the casino industry in the Pacific and for whom access to Guam and Saipan is the gateway to the United States, just as Macau is the gateway to China: the Sy family and the Tan family. In particular, Teresita Sy-Coson, a Filipino billionaire ranked ninth on the Forbes list, and her mother, Felicita Tan, a major benefactor of the Diocese of Imus (the first diocese where Tagle became bishop) and the Diocese of Manila. Teresita is vice president of *SM Investment Corporation*, which owns casinos throughout the Pacific through *Belle Corporation* and casinos in Macau through *Melco Corporation*. We are talking about billions and billions of dollars in an industry that is growing enormously and steadily in China and the United States.

It is not just a matter of friends and acquaintances: there are at least five sources who wish to remain anonymous, including three from Macao, who concord that Cardinal Tagle regularly gambles in Macao casinos through a proxy or avatar who places bets for him. Whether this is a gambling addiction or something else is unknown, but it is certain that Tagle is part of a network of billionaires all involved in the development of casinos in the Pacific.

And it is natural to think that this is also the financial source of the short and long videos (expensive productions) that have been flooding all the media and social networks for a month, from YouTube to Tiktok, promoting Tagle as the next Pope, extolling his extraordinary abilities, his compassion, his immigrant origins (his grandfather).