

Cardinals' homilies before conclave speak volumes

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Congolese Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu of Kinshasa, left, distributes Communion at St. Gabriel the Archangel, his titular church in the Rome suburb of Della Vittoria, May 4. (RNS photo/Claire Giangravé)

At a church in a Roman suburb on Sunday, Congolese Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu of Kinshasa preached on a story from the Gospel of John in which Jesus' followers in the days after his death returned to their day jobs, afraid to rile those who put Jesus to death. He used the passage to pray for God to embolden the cardinals gathered in Rome in their work electing a new pope.

“We ask that the Holy Spirit, who encouraged the apostles to challenge the fear and the ire of the authorities of the time, to enlighten our cardinals who will gather in two days to elect a pope for the universal church who has an unshakable faith and is ready to face the challenges of the world today,” Ambongo told the congregation at St. Gabriel the Archangel in Della Vittoria.

Ambongo, considered a possible candidate to succeed Pope Francis, who died April 21, knows about the ire of the authorities. Appointed metropolitan archbishop of Mbandaka-Bikoro in 2016 and later vice president of that country’s bishops’ conference, Ambongo supported Catholic clergy and lay protests against President Joseph Kabila’s attempt to delay elections. Ambongo asked for an investigation to hold government forces accountable for violent suppression of protesters.

He became the head of the Archdiocese of Kinshasa in 2018 and Francis made him a cardinal the following year, after which Ambongo joined the Council of Cardinals advising the pope in his reform of the curia in 2020. Since 2023 he has served as president of the Symposium of Bishops Conferences of Africa and Madagascar.

“I am not here for Congo, or for Africa. I am here for the universal church. Our concern is for the universal church. When we are finished, I will return to Kinshasa and I will put on my hat as archbishop of Kinshasa and the fight continues,” Ambongo said.

At churches around Rome on Sunday, the cardinals who will begin their voting for pope on Wednesday made customary visits to their “titular” churches—where they are honorary members of the clergy as part of their rights as cardinals—to express their thoughts on what kind of pope, or what kind of church, they are looking for.

The passage from John, in which Jesus appears to the disconsolate apostles and tells the first pope, St. Peter, “Feed my flock,” was the Gospel reading at Francis’s funeral mass. The cardinals would hear it again Sunday evening, at a mass in St. Peter’s Basilica marking the end of the Novemdiales, the nine days of mourning that follow the death of a pope.

The pontiff who urged his priests to have “the smell of the sheep”—to stay close to the faithful, not walled up inside their churches and doctrinal beliefs—seemed to be sending a message from beyond the grave. But on Sunday Vatican observers, keen to pick up any clues to how the cardinals will vote, strained to hear the messages being sent from the pulpits of Rome.

Cardinal Francois-Xavier Bustillo of Ajaccio, who supported Francis's concern for migrants and refugees, said in his homily at Santa Maria Immacolata di Lourdes a Boccea that Jesus "doesn't ask if you are strong, if you have a marketing strategy, if you can speak languages." Instead, he asks "to love him until the end," which means "we must be docile and responsible."

At Santa Maria ai Monti, Cardinal Jean-Marc Noël Aveline of Marseille said the reading was about Jesus' call to love and welcome others. "Let's not be afraid of those who are different from us. Because every man, every woman is a brother, a sister, for whom Christ has died," Aveline, who is considered a Francis-like candidate to the papacy, said.

Hungarian Cardinal Péter Erdo, a favorite contender for the papacy among conservative prelates, focused on history and tradition at the church of St. Francesca Romana, and touched on the need to promote collegiality among bishops, and the "decisive" role that bishops have in running local dioceses.

"We pray for the conclave, for the new pope who will be elected for the church who will have to fulfill his mission at a dramatic moment for the history of the church," Erdo said.

But many cardinals, encountering journalists outside their churches after mass, declined to offer an interpretation of their remarks. Ambongo, considered the leader of the resistance by some African cardinals against Francis's 2023 opening to bless same-sex couples, was asked about the issue of LGBTQ outreach outside San Gabriele, but said only that the cardinals are "not (concerned) with the controversies."

He also denied having spoken to conservative US cardinals such as Cardinal Raymond Leo Burke at pre-conclave meetings known as general congregations. "Americans can talk to each other; Africans can talk to each other but the work is the work of the Holy Spirit," he said. About his chances of being elected pope, he said: "Why not? Every Catholic can become pope, that is the law, everyone, not just cardinals."

Two US cardinals were more forthcoming. Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, arriving by subway at the church of St. Mary of the Graces, said the cardinals are converging on an emphasis on continuity with Francis' pontificate. "There is no going back," he said.

New York Archbishop Cardinal Timothy Dolan's homily at Our Lady of Guadalupe church was quick, citing Francis's distaste for long-winded homilies, but the cardinal took time to tell reporters afterward that the cardinals are looking for a candidate who can match Francis's humility and charisma with Pope Benedict XVI's "intellect" and Pope John Paul II's "bravery."

Dolan also dealt briefly with reporters' questions about a post on the White House X account showing an artificial-intelligence-generated photo of US President Donald Trump as pontiff that irked some Catholics. "It wasn't good," said Dolan, calling it "a brutta figura," or "bad form" in Italian.

If the voting cardinals are largely keeping their own counsel, some indications of the battle they will be facing as the conclave begins have appeared. On Sunday the Catholic website The Pillar published the text of the general congregation speech given last week by Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, a strong [advocate](#) for the territory's pro-democracy movement. The cardinal shared a few fond memories of Francis before attacking the pontiff's signature theological focus, synodality.

"The word 'reform' is magical, especially for the young, but it is also dangerous," the 93-year-old cardinal reportedly said.

Zen also pushed back against Francis's idea that clericalism, or priestly entitlement, was behind the phenomenon of clergy sexual abuse that has so long tormented the church. Instead, Zen blamed the sexual revolution of the 1960s, saying, "We cannot help but see a misguided effort to adapt to the spirit of the world rather than firmly opposing it."

After calling on the next pope to "decisively" halt the synodal process, Zen said, "this is a matter of life or death for the church founded by Jesus." —Religion News Service