

# Will Asia rise to the Papal throne?

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**Hong KongCNN** — “Habemus papam!” From the grand, central balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, that proclamation will soon be announced to the world once again.

“We have a pope!”

But when Benedict XVI’s successor and new shepherd of the global Catholic Church steps into the light, it’s seen as unlikely that he will come from Asia.

The College of Cardinals, also known as the princes of the church, counts 207 members among its red-robed ranks, according to the Holy See Press Office. Of those, just 115 are expected to vote. Any cardinal over 80 years of age cannot.

Among them, Europe boasts the largest voting bloc with 61 cardinals, followed by North and Latin America for a combined 33. Africa has 11 cardinals eligible to vote, Asia has 11, while Oceania has just one, says the Holy See.

One of these 115 men will become the world’s 266th pontiff.

“If we vote according to numbers, it’s more likely than anything else that the next pope will be from Europe,” says Monsignor Pedro Quitorio, Media Director of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, or CBCP, and priest since 1981. In

the Papal conclave, the group of electors to choose the next Bishop of Rome, “we (Asia) are a minority.”

Yet hope for an Asian pope remains strong. Its source is the massive Catholic Church in the Philippines. An estimated 81% of its citizens – some 77 million people – subscribe to the Catholic faith, making it the church’s biggest bastion in the Far East.

Shortly after the news broke that Benedict XVI would step down, the name Luis Antonio Tagle, a new cardinal from the Philippines, was floated as a potential next in line. At 56, the cherubic-cheeked and often-smiling Tagle serves as the Archbishop of Manila.

“He’s a person that I would like to look up to as a Pope,” says Quitaro who describes Tagle as a “very simple guy” who prefers visiting people by foot, taking non-air conditioned buses and flying in economy rather than business class.

While simple may be one descriptor, social-media savvy is another.

The cardinal’s Facebook page has more than 120,000 “Likes,” while he posts videos of himself that spark hundreds more “Shares.” As with Benedict, Tagle also tweets, though his last Twitter message dates back to August 4, 2012 with the micro-sermon: “Each day is a brand new opportunity to be Jesus to the world.” In July last year, he hosted the Philippines’ first-ever Catholic social media summit and spoke about the “spirituality of social media” and “a mission” in using it, adds Quitaro.

As it stands, Tagle is the second youngest cardinal in the College of Cardinals. If he became pope, he would be two years younger than Pope John Paul II, who was confirmed at the age of 58.

“Everybody would love it but that’s kind of wishing too much,” adds Quitaro. “(Tagle) was only made cardinal last October. It would not be very realistic to expect.”

When asked about his chances of being pope, he says Tagle “just laughs and laughs.”

If he did assume office, Tagle would face the daunting task of shepherding the Catholic Church’s 1.2 billion followers through a storm of scandals and challenges to its authority - both around the world and at home.

The Philippines, in many ways, is a microcosm of the church’s global problems. Women in the country expect more government support for reproductive issues, while gays and lesbians fight for social acceptance and marriage equality. A number of priests face allegations of child abuse.

And while many Catholics in the Philippines would cheer a “Pinoy” pope as their greatest dream, others would see it as their greatest nightmare.

### **Feminist: Filipino pope is ‘biggest fear’**

“My biggest fear is if the next pope were Filipino,” says Elizabeth Angsioco, a feminist leader and national chairwoman of the Democratic Socialist Women of the Philippines. “I think a Filipino pope will do more harm than good to human rights here.”

“People will kill me (for saying that),” she laughs, “but really it’s true.”

She points to the landmark legislation allowing the government to fund contraception and sex education classes, signed in December 2012 by Filipino President Benigno Aquino – a cause that Angsioco trumpeted. For each of the 14 years prior, parliament had killed the proposal.

Angsioco, who was raised Catholic but now no longer identifies as such, says the Catholic Church’s strident opposition to the bill spurred more people to support it “which led to the weakening of the clout of the church.”

The church maintained that the bill would destroy marriage and morality in the Philippines, but the legislation enjoyed widespread popular support – a sign of shifting public opinion.

According to Manila-based survey firm Social Weather Stations, in 1990, six out of ten Filipinos surveyed agreed with the statement “The choice of

a family planning method is a personal choice of couples, and no one should interfere with it.” By 2011, more than eight in ten agreed.

“But if a Filipino becomes Pope then it significantly strengthens their hand,” says Angsioco. “The church would gain ground in terms of clout and more people.”

Her concern then is a potential rollback of the reproductive health bill – which she sees as a potential solution to the country’s soaring birth rate – among the highest in Southeast Asia. According to the United Nations Population Fund, half of the 3.4 million pregnancies that happen in the Philippines each year are unintended. One third of those are aborted.

For its part, the Catholic Church’s stance remains unwavering.

“Abortion and contraception are really doctrinal teachings of the Catholic Church,” explains the CBCP’s Quitaro. “Even bishops or popes cannot compromise that. Whoever holds that office will toe that line whether liberal or conservative.”

### **Gay priest: Legal same-sex marriage ‘in 10 years’**

“I hope and pray the next pope will be more...not necessarily pro-LGBT... but at least softer with their stance towards the community,” says Reverend Ceejay Agbayani. The founding pastor of the Protestant LGBTS Christian Church explains the term “LGBT” refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. He notes the extra “S” is for straight people as his church includes everyone.

The gay priest, married to a man for the past four years, has conducted at least 197 same-sex marriages since his first ceremony in 2009. The Philippines’ first ever such wedding, he recalls, was conducted in the early 1990s.

Such marriages, however, are illegal in the Philippines. Yet Agbayani explains they are becoming more popular as symbolic events allowing for the public expression of love in front of family and friends. The LGBTS Church plans to host a mass gay wedding in June and expects more than 50 couples to register.

Rising interest is rooted in slow, but growing legalization of same-sex marriage in nearly one dozen countries around the world, including Argentina, Canada, South Africa and Spain. In February, France's lower house of parliament approved a same-sex marriage bill. In 2012, Barack Obama became the first U.S. president to voice his support for same-sex marriage.

But in Asia, no country has legalized same-sex marriage. In the Philippines, public polling reveals that Filipinos accept members of the LGBT community in their lives but gay sex simply goes too far.

In a 1996 Social Weather Stations survey, out of nearly 40,000 Filipinos polled, two out of three people inferred they would be fine with a gay neighbor. In a 2009 survey that included about 15,000 more people, that number remained nearly unchanged.

But 82% of respondents across the Philippines said sexual relations between two adults of the same sex was "always wrong" in a separate 1991 survey. Just 2% said it was "not wrong at all." In the same survey 16 years later, the number had hardly changed, with 79% agreeing that same-sex acts were wrong all the time, though the percentage of people who were completely fine with the idea had risen to nearly 5%.

The CBCP's Qutorio reiterates that church teachings on homosexuality and same-sex marriage – as with birth control and abortion – are doctrinal teachings that cannot be changed. Survey numbers imply a strong majority of Filipinos support the Church's stance.

"And even before that, I would go to our Constitution, which believes marriage can only be undertaken by a male and female. Even chicken and caribou (water buffalo) don't do same-sex acts," says Qutorio. "It doesn't happen because it's natural law."

And so it remains constitutional law in the Philippines.

But Reverend Agbayani believes the tolerance of his countrymen will evolve over the next ten years. He predicts legalized same-sex marriage will happen within that time because of the advocacy work that he and his peers carry out.

"It's like I have 100 sacks of rice and I'm climbing on the mountain," he

explains. “It’s so hard but with small steps anything is possible.”

That includes the possibility for Cardinal Tagle to become pope and for the Protestant Agbayani, a baptized Catholic, to return to the fold.

Recalling his impressions from a meeting with then-Bishop Tagle in 2005, he remembers “a very wise, intelligent bishop.”

“You should see his charm. He is soft and understanding. If Cardinal Tagle wins (in the Papal conclave), I hope he will use his compassionate nature to deal with issues of the Philippines and the global church.”

And if the Catholic hierarchy somehow allowed same-sex marriage within his lifetime, Agbayani quickly says he will be “the first one to go back to the Catholic faith and to the Vatican – and to conduct same sex marriages.”

But he admits that is not likely – even 100 years from now.

### **Child lawyer: Many abuse cases ‘not seen’**

The Philippine Catholic Church is “absolutely not” doing enough to protect children, says Katrina Legarda, Director of the national Child Protection Unit Network, the country’s largest child safety group that provides medical, legal and psycho-social services.

A priest accused of child abuse in 1999 stands as one of the well-known family law attorney’s first – and unforgettable – cases for Child Protection Unit Network. The judge acquitted the defendant, Father Macario Apuya, for lack of evidence saying he might have been a “flirt” but he was no “child molestor much less a rapist.”

“When I was handling that case, not one single priest said child abuse is wrong,” she remembers.

Fourteen years later, Legarda still fights and still remains a critical Catholic, claiming priests get transferred or are simply forced into retirement after child abuse allegations.

“I don’t recall one” instance of a transfer or forced retirement pertaining to priests abusing children, replied Monsignor Quitorio to the accusations.

“There is not one yet.”

Such talk echoes similar cases that have rocked the Catholic Church in Western countries, including the United States, the staunch Catholic countries of France and Ireland, and Germany, the homeland of Benedict XVI.

Even in the final days of Benedict’s reign, accusations of priest misconduct came to light in the United Kingdom with the accelerated resignation of Cardinal Keith O’Brien, Archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh. A British newspaper had reported that four priests – three active and one former – had leveled allegations OF sexual impropriety dating back three decades. After first challenging the claims, O’Brien later released a statement apologizing, saying “I wish to take this opportunity to admit there have been times that my sexual conduct has fallen below the standards expected of me as a priest.”

The Philippines has not been immune to questions either. In September 2012, the Vatican suspended Monsignor Cristobal Garcia, a senior Philippine priest, over accusations he abused children more than 20 years ago while serving in the United States. Garcia has denied the allegations.

“We have a number of these cases... Monsignor Garcia...six or seven more,” acknowledged the CBCP’s Quitaro. “But here in the country, cases of pedophilia are not so rampant. I can be very sure that it’s very rare.”

“When it comes to national statistics, I wouldn’t know,” counters Legarda who adds that the Philippines is “a bad place” for official data.

“That’s just what we see. Many other cases are actually not seen” because they are settled at the local level, she says.

Legarda hopes that Cardinal Tagle – whether pope or not – will listen to child advocates who have asked that closed abuse cases involving priests be reopened.

To that, Quitaro says any “closing, reopening or resolution of child abuse cases involving priests or pastors – should there be any – is the competence of civil courts not of any church.”

“I am not aware of a church or denomination having power to do that,” he adds.

Even with her concerns, Legarda says she’s encouraged by what she’s heard about Tagle.

“Everyone I have spoken to has considered him to be extremely progressive and extremely open to handling issues that others are not inclined to touch. He is extremely young. He is not one of these hard-core, closed Catholics.”

But while those may be desired qualities for many Catholic youths and moderates around the world, Legarda believes they may hold him back from ascending to the Papal throne when some of the oldest and most conservative vote for the church’s next leader.

The Vatican has said it wants to have a new pontiff installed in time for church services leading up to Easter Sunday on March 31. Whoever is chosen will carry the hopes and fears of 1.2 billion Catholics around the world.

“Whoever is chosen,” asserts Quitariorio, “when we hear ‘Habemus papam’ everyone will rejoice.”