Could the next pope hail from Africa or Asia?

By Stefano Esposito and Anna Heling
February 11, 2013

The top candidates for the next pope must include black and brown faces — and come from countries in the developing world, where the Catholic Church is booming, according to the conventional wisdom.

But like the Vatican’s centuries-old and cloistered election process itself, the matter is infinitely more complicated, say several Chicago-area experts.

“And that’s why Catholics believe the Holy Spirit will guide [the cardinals],” said Peter Casarella, director of the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University. “It’s hard. It’s not an easy job.”

The tricky mission awaiting the College of Cardinals when it convenes in Rome to elect a new pontiff is to choose one who appeals both to the growing masses in Africa, Latin America and Asia, as well as to some Western followers who question the relevancy of their faith, experts say. So who’s in the running?

“It’s probably too early to do a lot of handicapping — it’s too early to start sizing up the horse race,” said Ralph Keen, a professor of Catholic studies and history at UIC. “There are going to be dark horses.”

Nonetheless, Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana and Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila in the Philippines are on many shortlists.

“I think it’s Turkson,” predicted Michael Murphy, director of Loyola University’s Catholic Studies program. “Turkson is attractive because [of] his job right now . . . [on] the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Those types of themes in the church and having that type of expertise in this day and age are going to be very attractive. I think the church is ready for an African pope.”

Casarella says he understands why Tagle could be the next pope.

“I wouldn’t say he’s my front-runner — I don’t have a front-runner,” Casarella said. “He represents one of the largest dioceses in the world. He’s very charismatic. He blogs and tweets. . . . But he also deals with the question of the renewal of faith and the need to keep a strong faith.”
Though few are absolutely ruling out the possibility of the election of the first American pope, it appears unlikely it would be Cardinal Francis George.

“Given the current pope’s age and his reason for stepping down, they will be looking for someone younger and more vigorous. . . .” Keen said.