Cardinal George doesn't rule out an American pope

By Manya A. Barchear
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Fifteen years to the day that he became a prince of the Roman Catholic Church, Chicago's Cardinal Francis George said he wouldn't rule out the possibility of a fellow American becoming pope.

During and after a lecture at Loyola University Chicago School of Law on Thursday, George said New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley and a number of other international cardinals whose names have been bandied about as contenders are indeed "plausible candidates" to lead the church.

Until now, the odds of an American pope were slim to none. According to conventional wisdom, putting a man from the world's only superpower in charge of the world's 1 billion Catholics would give the U.S. too much power, Vatican experts said.

Even in 2005, when George was said to possess all the qualities of a papabile, or papal candidate, Roman clergy reportedly muttered under their breath, "Peccato e americano," or it's a shame he's American.

"We're not quite the hegemonic power that we were even a few years ago," George said, referring to the U.S. "It's a much more pluralistic world. Within that, we have a very important role, but … in the international sphere, we don't play the role we once did. … So it does open up possibilities for an American pope who wouldn't be considered an agent of the U.S. government. That's been the argument."

George reiterated Thursday that the cardinals together would decide when to convene the conclave that will elect a successor to Pope Benedict XVI after he resigns Feb. 28. Cardinals from around the world will gather in Rome and meet informally starting March 1 to prepare for the papal election. George also participated in the conclave in 2005, when Benedict was elected after Pope John Paul II died.

"If you go into conclave too quickly, it's going to be a long conclave," George said, adding that a long conclave might signal conflict and tension and wouldn't be healthy for the church.

With that in mind, George stressed the importance of the informal conversations leading up to the conclave. Of the 117 cardinal electors, George said he knows only a third "fairly well" and another third not at all.
"When you're together for the first week or two after the seat becomes vacant, you're in these conversations, everybody is there and you know most probably, not necessarily, but most probably the next pope is seated in that room," George said. "So everybody speaks what they want the next pope to hear about the state of the church where they are."

Still, the pope's national origin matters less than who he is and how he leads, George said. Other "plausible candidates" include Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Canada, Cardinal Leonardo Sandri of Argentina and Cardinal Angelo Scola of Italy, George said.

"He has to be a man of deep faith, a man of prayer. He has to know how to govern," George said about the next pope. "He has to be universal, particularly with concern for the poor around the world. … He has to be someone who is at ease in a lot of different cultures … speaks a number of languages … and someone who people will trust."

George said the next pope also should be "somebody at ease with contemporary culture and at ease with the media too if possible."

"People react differently to media in different cultures," George said. "Americans are more used to having every action scrutinized. That's the way it works in our version of a free society. Other people get more excited about that because they're not used to that kind of scrutiny."

"But," he added, "it doesn't enter into the choice of a pope."