NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Final days of Benedict full of unclear calls for change

Joshua J. McElwee Dennis Coday | Mar. 11, 2013
Benedict Resigns
Rome

As a few night owls strolled through the crisp Roman evening Feb. 28, they were illuminated by one less reflection of lights. Behind the northern side of the square?s iconic colonnades, the apostolic palace was dark.

In a small but tell-tale sign of the transition facing the church, the lights of the pope?s apartment had been turned off.

Hours before, as Pope Benedict XVI?s resignation took effect at exactly 8 p.m. local time, the doors to the apartment had been ceremonially sealed with ribbon and wax, not to be broken before the election of a new pontiff by the church?s cardinals.

It was a dramatic change in scenery. And in the days before and after, change has been the watchword of the former pope, the cardinals who have taken up the role of shepherding the church, and analysts speculating on what happens next for the central command of the world?s 1.2 billion Catholics.

Following a series of scandals -- reports that gay Roman priests are overly influenced by their lovers, the resignation of a cardinal accused of sexual impropriety, and the continuing effects of last year?s trial of the papal valet for leaking Vatican documents -- each has said the church needs to go through some sort of spiritual change or transformation.

?This is a time of thirst? for the church, Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, considered a long-shot possibility to be pope, told *NCR* in a brief interview March 4.

What?s unclear is just what?s needed to slake the thirst or what is meant to be transformed. While the cardinals and Benedict, now known as the pope emeritus, have repeatedly referred to the need for such change, their references have been obscure if not downright opaque.

Scandals, responses

Revelations regarding the Roman priests were first made in a report by the Italian publications *La Repubblica* and *Panorama* the weekend of Feb. 22. The reports, which relied on unnamed sources, stated that the pope had decided to resign following the blackmailing of Vatican priests involved in gay love affairs.

The report said that three cardinals who were commissioned by the pope to study the leak of Vatican documents last year submitted a dossier that referred to a cabal of gay priests who had been the subject of ?external influence? because of their extracurricular activities.

In an editorial on Vatican Radio?s website Feb. 23, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, wrote

that only the three cardinals submitting the report had seen its contents and that people were using ?gossip, misinformation and sometimes slander? to discredit the church.

Three days later, the Vatican announced that Benedict had accepted the resignation of Scottish Cardinal Keith O?Brien, who had been accused in mid-February of inappropriate sexual activity by three of his priests and one former priest in incidents spanning three decades.

The cardinal, who turns 75 this month, had submitted his resignation to the pope in November, the Vatican spokesman said Feb. 25, and Benedict had meant to approve O?Brien?s resignation earlier, but ?because of the date of the pope?s resignation, some things were held up a bit.?

In response to a question about how the resignation fit in with the accusations against the cardinal, Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, who translated Lombardi?s Italian, replied: ?Our role here is simply to confirm the resignation. We do not comment on other stories, or things you may have heard.?

O?Brien, who headed the St. Andrews-Edinburgh archdiocese, initially denied the allegations, but issued an apology March 3, acknowledging, ?My sexual conduct has fallen below the standards expected of me as a priest, archbishop and cardinal.?

He had said Feb. 25 that he would recuse himself from the College of Cardinals? secret vote to determine the next leader of the Roman Catholic church, so as to not attract media attention.

Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl, who is to vote in the conclave, said in an interview Feb. 26 that while the church experiences ?problems? like sex abuse, it works to resolve them.

?As long as this church is incarnational, there are going to be problems,? said Wuerl, speaking in an interview at the Pontifical North American College. ?I think the strength of the Catholic church is that when it does finally identify a problem, it works to resolve it. The sexual abuse of minors is an example in the United States.?

?Great weight?

Perhaps reflecting on those problems himself, Benedict gave a surprisingly intimate speech in his last public remarks as pontiff Feb. 27.

Speaking from a large white dais in front of St. Peter?s Basilica, after touring a crowd estimated at 150,000 in his white popemobile, Benedict said the papacy had been a ?great weight? upon his shoulders.

With about 60 cardinals and dozens of bishops, along with a number of other dignitaries, surrounding him, the soon-to-retire pope said it ?was a part of the journey of the church that has had moments of joy and light, but also moments that were not easy.?

?I felt like St. Peter and the apostles in the boat on the Sea of Galilee,? Benedict went on. ?The Lord has given us many days of sunshine and a light breeze, the days when the fishing is plentiful. But there were also times when the water was rough ? and the Lord seemed to be sleeping.?

At his last meeting with the College of Cardinals the following day, Benedict again referred to troubles during his pontificate, saying that during his almost eight years as pope, ?we have experienced in faith beautiful moments of radiant light in the church?s journey along with times when clouds have darkened the sky.?

In the meeting with the some 144 cardinals, among them many of the 115 men who will elect Benedict?s successor in the secret conclave, the former pope also referred obliquely to needed changes in the church.

?The church is not an institution devised and built at table, but a living reality,? Benedict told the cardinals, gathered in the Vatican?s ornately decorated Clementine Hall. ?She lives along the course of time by transforming herself, like any living being, yet her nature remains the same. At her heart is Christ.?

Governance issues

Hours before his final remarks to the cardinals, one of them had directly criticized the retiring pope.

While the former pope was a ?brilliant teacher,? Sydney Cardinal George Pell told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ?government wasn?t his strongest point.?

Referring to last year?s Vatican leaks, Pell continued: ?I think the governance is done by most of the people around the pope and that wasn?t always done brilliantly.?

Yet three of Pell?s American confreres took a decidedly different approach later that night during a press briefing, saying Benedict?s call for change or transformation was focused more on the cardinals? spiritual growth than structural church reform.

?The Holy Father did not seem to give any indications of what he expected other than that we pray very hard and work to discern what God?s will is to be able to select the next Holy Father,? Boston Cardinal Sean O?Malley said at a briefing at the North American College when asked about Benedict?s reference to transformation.

?I don?t think he was giving us any subliminal message about what structural changes to make,? O?Malley continued. ?We?re talking about personal conversion and deepening our life of discipleship and understanding of the Gospel.?

Houston Cardinal Daniel DiNardo gave a similar response. ?I took the talk of personal transformation as holiness that we all need as disciples of Jesus ? so we will be an effective, credible witness to the Gospel,? he said.

Days later, some of the American cardinals were striking a different tune in *NCR* interviews.

Chicago Cardinal Francis George said March 2 the new pope will have to lead a serious reform of the Roman Curia and help restore a sense of trust compromised by the Vatileaks affair.

?Obviously something?s not working if the personal papers of the pope can be purloined from his desk and be printed in the media, including papers we?ve sent,? said George, who is one of the cardinal electors and is considered to be influential among the other 10 American cardinals who can also vote for the new pope.

Likewise, O?Malley said March 3 that the ?central government of the church,? looms as a key issue for the conclave, including greater coordination and efficiency among the various Vatican departments.

?Greater coordination among the dicasteries themselves is important, and greater efficiency in dealing with the problems, so as not to thrust the Holy Father into the midst of all these controversies,? said O?Malley, who has generated much interest in the Italian media as a possible, if unlikely, candidate for the papacy.

Evangelical reverberations

For Schönborn at least, whatever change comes from the papal transition, it will necessarily have to be evangelical.

Schönborn spoke to *NCR* after a memorial service for Hungarian martyr Maria Restituta at a Roman parish that is a shrine to 20th-century martyrs. Asked what issues the conclave faces, Schönborn replied: ?This is the kind of event that shows what is really important.?

Blessed Restituta, a Catholic sister and nurse at an Austrian hospital during the Second World War, was martyred by the Nazis when she refused to take down crucifixes from her hospital?s walls.

The ceremony to recognize the beatified sister took place at the ornate Basilica of St. Bartholomew on Tiber Island, which was dedicated by Pope John Paul II in 2000 to the martyrs of the 20th and 21st centuries and contains relics from dozens of them, including El Salvador Archbishop Oscar Romero, Austrian layman Franz Jägerstätter, and Italian Fr. Andrea Santoro, killed in Turkey in 2006.

Cardinal Miloslav Vlk, former archbishop of Prague who attended the event with the city?s current archbishop, Cardinal Dominik Duka, said the ceremony gave ?symbolic proof of the suffering? of martyrs during the Second World War.

Asked to compare the event to the cardinals? continued deliberations over the next pope, Vlk said Restituta?s witness ?confirms the role of the church.?

?The church has to be brave enough to evangelize in every situation,? said Vlk, who served as Prague?s archbishop from 1991-2010. Ordained in 1968, the communist state revoked his authorization to work as a priest in 1978. He spent the next decade as a window cleaner in Prague.

What had disappeared from conversations here is speculation over what caused Benedict to resign. Very few say it has anything to do with sexual transgressions of Roman priests -- most seem willing to take Benedict at his word, that the cumulative effect of eight years of dealing with the sex abuse scandal, corruption and infighting inside the Holy See, and the changing demographics of a globalizing church wore the octogenarian out.

Whether the cardinals choosing the new pope look for evangelical, spiritual or administrative solutions -- or all three or more -- one thing seems certain: Change is coming; it has already come. And the cardinals know it.

At press time, around 146 of the church?s cardinals, 110 of them electors, had arrived in Rome and were meeting daily. A date to open the conclave that will elect the pope had not yet been set and on March 5 the cardinals said they were willing to take their time.

Veterans of the process -- there are 50 of them who voted in 2005 -- describe the electors? time in conclave as almost a retreat-like experience. George called the conclave ?a quiet time? and ?a time of prayer and voting.? There is no electioneering and little discussion, he said.

The discussions of issues come in the days before the conclave, during the formal daily meetings of the cardinals called the general congregations, and during the informal coffee breaks and long evening meals. By all accounts, the discussions can be frank.

?Nobody wants to rush this,? DiNardo said at a press conference March 5 after three sessions of the general

congregation.

O?Malley agreed: ?The fear is that if we don?t take enough time in the general congregations, once we get into the conclave, it could drag on.?

At press time, longtime Vatican observers were putting the date of the conclave at March 10 or 11, but all the electors had still not arrived.

Before the lights of the apostolic palace went dark Feb. 28, a white helicopter took Benedict into retirement at Castel Gandolfo, where he was to remain secluded from the conclave. As he flew away, the bells of St. Peter?s rang for some 20 minutes, the sound washing across pilgrims gathered in the square to watch the scene.

The same bells will announce the election of Benedict?s successor. What remains unknown is just what echoes will reverberate in coming days and months.

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. Dennis Coday is *NCR* editor. Senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. contributed to this report. All three are in Rome providing coverage of the papal transition.]

Source URL (retrieved on *2016-05-30 15:47*): http://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/final-days-benedict-full-unclear-calls-change