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Vatican's new religious leader asks for prayers, forgiveness

Joshua J. McElwee | Apr. 8, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis

The Franciscan leader Pope Francis named to be the Vatican's second-in-command for religious life has written to his order, saying the appointment leaves him with "divided feelings" of joy and sadness and that he will miss his confreres' company "at all times."

Additionally, Fr. José Rodríguez Carballo asks his fellow Franciscans for forgiveness for times he may have not fulfilled his role as the successor of 13th-century St. Francis of Assisi.

"With Thanksgiving I cannot help but to recognize my limitations," writes Rodríguez, formerly the minister general of the Orders of Friars Minor, which represents about 15,000 Franciscans in 113 countries.

"If true, and it is, that to whom much is given much will be required, at the moment I feel stronger than ever the weight of my weaknesses, so I apologize."

"First to God, who will judge me and know me better than I know myself, and then to you, my dear brothers," Rodríguez continues. "Forgive me for as many times as I may have offended you. Putting my life in the hands of the Lord I can assure you I never wanted favors and I never wanted to fall into favoritism."

Rodríguez, a Spaniard who was serving in Rome in his role with the Franciscans, was announced Saturday [1] as the new secretary for the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

He replaces U.S. Archbishop Joseph Tobin, a Redemptorist who was named archbishop of Indianapolis in the fall after serving in the Vatican role two years.

In the role, Rodríguez will assist the head of the congregation, Brazilian Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, with overseeing the work of the approximately 900,000 men and women in religious orders and communities worldwide.

Vatican-watchers are scrutinizing Rodríguez's appointment as possible indicators of three primary things: what kind of administrators Pope Francis is looking for in the Vatican's central bureaucracy; whether the pope is undertaking reform of that bureaucracy; and whether he may be looking to ratchet down potential tensions with religious priests, brothers and sisters around the world.

Rodríguez's appointment to the congregation for religious is somewhat unusual, as it is not always the head of a religious order who takes the post.

Additionally, Rodríguez had been serving as president of the Union of Superiors General, an international group based in Rome that represents male religious orders from around the world.

For those looking for insight on how someone who has spent his adult life with a religious order will see his

new role at the Vatican, Rodríguez's letter, released on the Franciscans' website [2] Saturday in French and Croatian, may offer some clues.

An English translation is available on the "A Friar's Life" blog [3].

Writing to his brothers around the world, Rodríguez says while "there has been much" he has given to his order during his time in its leadership, there is "certainly much, much more, that I received from you."

"You have been for me a great gift, a great gift!" he writes. "Now that I temporarily separate myself from you, I beg you, kissing your feet, continue to be my support and blessing with your prayers and with your gift of brotherhood and friendship."

"Right now I feel in my heart divided feelings: joy and sadness," Rodríguez continues.

"Joy for the Lord is trusting me and for the Holy Father, my 'Lord Pope' Francis, I feel a great responsibility to serve the religious and consecrated life, also sign of his confidence in me and in the Order.

"Sadness because I miss you, my dear brothers. I am going to miss your company in prayer, at recreation, at meals, at all times. I will miss your wise counsel and your outstretched hand in need. I will miss you ... I'll keep working for the life I love, because it is mine: religious life and, therefore, also for the Franciscan life. Consider me at your service."

Rodríguez's appointment could have particular significance in the United States, where his new congregation had launched an investigation, known as an "apostolic visitation," of individual orders of U.S. Catholic sisters in 2009.

That investigation began under Cardinal Franc Rode, Braz de Aviz's predecessor as the Vatican congregation's leader.

Braz de Aviz and Tobin took a more conciliatory tone toward the sisters. Following his appointment in 2011, Braz de Aviz told *NCR* [4] he wanted to "learn from" and "walk with" U.S. sisters.

A final report on the visitation, which saw teams of visitors go to about 90 U.S. religious congregations for interviews and discussions, was submitted [5] to the Vatican in January 2012. It is unknown what action the Vatican has taken on that matter.

As is traditional for the new secretary of the Vatican's religious congregation, the Vatican announced Saturday that Rodríguez is also going to be made an archbishop.

Noting that his ordination to the episcopate is to occur May 18 in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, Rodríguez ends his letter to his confreres by saying, "I wish that day to have you all with me physically."

"I know that's not possible," he writes. "So I ask a remembrance in the Eucharist and in your prayers. Pray for me as I pray for you."

"This is my last letter signed as your minister and servant," he concludes. "With that feeling, and with deep emotion, I bless you in the Seraphic Father."

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