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The "Stepping Out of The Room" Affair

Ken Briggs | Oct. 5, 2013 NCR Today

Let's ask ourselves:

Why would the Cardinal of New York say Pope Francis didn't step out of the room to clear his head before deciding to take the job?

The report of Francis' interview with Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari, stated clearly that the Argentinian cardinal did just that. The momentous election left his mind blank, he says in the report, so he removed himself to collect his thoughts before accepting.

According to the story in NCR, the pope's spokesman had been coy over rumors that Scalfari misrepresented aspects of the pope's account. Problem was, the pope himself didn't challenge the claim that he'd wandered out of range for a couple of minutes. But apparently Vatican communications didn't like something about Scalfari's reporting and wanted their doubts to go public.

Enter Cardinal Timothy Dolan. The pope-elect never did it, he said. Totally made up. He knows because he was there.

Why would Dolan want to correct something the pope hadn't complained about? Doesn't protocol call for cardinal electors to keep the details of such matters to themselves anyway?

Though aimed to discredit Scalfari's accuracy, don't the circumstances at least suggest that another purpose might have been to dent Francis' soaring reputation by subtly impugning his reliability? After all, Francis apparently stood by a story that Dolan labels an error.

Does it matter that Dolan, who has typified the obsession with the handfull of moral issues that Francis decried in that interview, is feeling a bit slighted? Does his allegiance with the decidedly conservative side of the church in America dispose him to join the chorus of criticism from the Catholic right?

Why would something as immaterial as whether the thunderstruck papal choice walked out of the room become reason to break a commonly accepted code of confidentiality?

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