Vatican
Vatican News
Pope Francis and two Spanish men stand around a table with newspapers and books on it

Pope Francis accepts gifts from journalists Julián Quirós and Javier Martínez-Brocal during an interview with the Spanish newspaper, ABC, at his residence at the Vatican in this photo released Dec. 18, 2022. The pope revealed to the newspaper that he wrote a resignation letter in 2013, his first year in office, to be used in case he became physically or mentally impaired and unable to fulfill the duties of the papacy. (CNS photo/Matias Nieto Koenig, courtesy ABC)

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Pope Francis said he wrote a resignation letter in 2013, his first year in office, to be used in case he became physically or mentally impaired and unable to fulfill the duties of the papacy.

In an interview published Dec. 18, the day after his 86th birthday, Francis said that during the time that Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone was Vatican secretary of state, a position he left in October 2013, he gave a resignation letter to the cardinal.

"I signed it and said, 'If I should become impaired for medical reasons or whatever, here is my renunciation. Here you have it,'" the pope told the Spanish newspaper ABC.

Francis joked that now that the letter's existence has been made public, someone will go after Bertone and say, "Give me that piece of paper!"

But he also said he was certain Bertone gave it to Cardinal Pietro Parolin, who succeeded him as secretary of state.

The interviewer also noted that Francis had named several women as secretaries or undersecretaries of Vatican offices, but that he had not appointed a woman to lead a Vatican dicastery, although his reform of the Roman Curia says it is possible for a layperson to head a dicastery.

Francis responded that he has been thinking of appointing a woman to lead "a dicastery where there will be a vacancy in two years." He did not say what office that was.

"There is nothing to prevent a woman from guiding a dicastery in which a layperson can be a prefect," the pope said.

However, "if it is dicastery of a sacramental nature," presumably like the dicasteries for the Doctrine of the Faith, for Bishops, for Clergy or for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "it has to be presided over by a priest or a bishop," the pope said.

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Asked if he worries about active Catholics who may feel neglected by the pope paying so much attention to people who feel far from the church, Francis responded, "If they are good, they will not feel neglected."

But if they do feel shunned, he said, they may share the fault of the elder son in the biblical parable of the prodigal son, echoing his complaint to his father, "I've served you for years and now you take care of him and don't pay any attention to me."

That attitude, the pope said, "an ugly sin, one of hidden ambition, of wishing to stand out and be considered."

Francis also told ABC that he believes the church is making progress "little by little" in tackling clerical sexual abuse and in becoming more transparent in handling the cases.

Asked what he would say to Catholics whose faith in the church falters every time a new case is made public, the pope said, "It is good that you feel outrage about this. That leads you to act to prevent it, to make your contribution."

"It doesn't scare me," the pope said. "If their faith is faltering, it's because it is alive. Otherwise, you would feel nothing at all."

Also Dec. 18, Italy's Canale 5 television station aired an interview with Francis in which he was asked about Dec. 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, when he began a prayer asking Mary to intercede for Ukraine and had to pause because he was crying.

War is "madness," the pope said. "I tell people, please, don't be afraid, but let's cry a little bit. We should be crying today about these cruelties" that always go with war.

Francis said he has met many children from Ukraine in the 10 months since Russia began the war. "None of them smile. Not one. They greet you, but they cannot smile. Who knows what they have seen."

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