

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 12, 2013 at 8:11am

Q&A on Benedict's bombshell

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NCR Today

Benedict Resigns

Rome — When you're talking about a church with more than 2,000 years of history, you don't get a chance to use terms such as "uncharted waters" very often, but that's precisely where Catholicism finds itself in the wake of Benedict XVI's bombshell announcement that he plans to resign Feb. 28.

At the moment, the list of unknowns about what it all means is considerably longer than the certainties. During a Vatican briefing Tuesday, reporters amused themselves by compiling a list of all the times the spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, replied to questions with some version of "I don't have precise information on that." They included:

- Exactly when will Benedict XVI depart for Castel Gandolfo after the formal end of his papacy at 8 p.m. Rome time Feb. 28, and when exactly will he return to move into a former monastery on Vatican grounds?
- What will happen to symbols of Benedict's papacy, such as papal ring and seal?
- Will Benedict take part in the public ceremonies of his successor, such as the installation Mass of the new pope?
- What will Benedict's title be after he steps down?
- Who exactly will move in with Benedict to run his household and act as aides?

Lombardi was charmingly frank in conceding that this is a "new situation" and it's not always "immediately obvious" how things will play out.

That uncertainty, however, hasn't put a dent in the flow of analysis and guesswork, more or less informed, in Rome. The following represents what we can say as of today in response to some of the most obvious questions.

Was this truly a surprise?

A handful of intimates obviously had a small window of advance notice. For instance, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, dean of the College of Cardinals, had a canned tribute ready to offer as soon as the pope was finished making his announcement.

For the most part, however, even insiders were caught off-guard. I can testify to that from personal experience. As it happened, I was scheduled to have lunch with a senior Vatican official on Monday, a guy who works just down the hall from the papal apartment. After the news broke, he was as flabbergasted by it as I was.

It's still not entirely clear exactly when Benedict made a firm decision to resign and thus how long the Vatican managed to keep it under wraps.

The editor of the Vatican newspaper wrote Monday that Benedict decided to step down almost a year ago after a grueling six-day trip to Mexico and Cuba last March. Lombardi, however, attempted to play down the importance of that outing, describing it as simply "one stage" in the pope's growing conviction that he no longer had the stamina to do the job adequately. The suggestion was that it's not as if the day after Benedict returned to Rome last March, he had a firm plan in mind.

Lombardi suggested that tentative preparations for Benedict's resignation were under way by November, when a small group of sisters living in a cloistered convent on the Vatican grounds left the facility and work began to convert it into a residence. Lombardi did not say, however, whether at that time it was communicated to anyone that this residence would eventually be occupied by the former pope.

Lombardi also responded to a bit of speculation floated by an Italian paper that perhaps Benedict's decision was related to a medical procedure at a Roman clinic. According to the spokesperson, this was a routine battery change for his pacemaker, which was installed before his election to the papacy.

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As a footnote, the Vatican had not officially confirmed before that Benedict has a pacemaker. Friends and people who worked with him in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith knew about it, but popes don't face the same pressure to release medical records as, say, presidents (and candidates for the presidency). The circumstances of the resignation already suggested that the cardinals electing the next pope may be more sensitive to potential health concerns, and this confirmation may add to that pressure.

(One point for the historical record. The coincidence that I happened to be in Rome when this happened has spawned speculation that I must have been in the know. While I'm usually happy to burnish my legend, the truth is that I just got lucky.)

When will the conclave begin?

Msgr. Guido Marini, the Master of Pontifical Liturgical Celebrations, told The Associated Press that under the terms of the event's constitution, it must be held 15 to 20 days after the period of *sede vacante*,

or "empty chair," begins Feb. 28. Doing the math, that means the conclave would begin somewhere between Friday, March 15, and Wednesday, March 20.

Given the perceived importance of having this wrapped up before Easter on March 31, that likely means the conclave will open on, or shortly after, March 15.

In all honesty, that 15-20 day delay is built into the rules largely to accommodate the circumstances surrounding a papal death, such as the need for cardinals around the world to drop everything and scramble to Rome, as well as allowances for the prescribed period of mourning for the dead pope and the funeral Mass. Since those things aren't required this time, the conclave probably could begin much earlier -- but this is the Vatican, and rules are rules.

Of course, it's impossible to say how long the conclave might take, and therefore when the church will have a new pope. The longest conclave in history took almost three years, the shortest around two hours. Given the Easter deadline and the desire to avoid impressions of gridlock and disarray, however, it's reasonable to think the conclave won't drag on more than a few days at most.

What's Benedict XVI going to do in the meantime?

Lombardi reminded the world this morning that until the bewitching hour of 8 p.m. Feb. 28, Benedict remains fully on the job. Lombardi confirmed he will maintain all the appointments presently on his calendar. They include:

- The Ash Wednesday service, which will be held in St. Peter's Basilica rather than the traditional station church of Santa Sabina to accommodate the larger than normal number of faithful as well as ecclesiastic dignitaries expected to show up. Lombardi said this will likely be the last large celebration presided over by Benedict XVI in St. Peter's.
- Appointments with Italian bishops making their *ad limina* visits to Rome, as well as audiences with visiting heads of state from Romania and Guatemala.
- An informal dialogue with the clergy of the Rome diocese, set for Thursday in the Vatican's Paul VI audience hall. By prior arrangement, Benedict agreed to discuss his experiences during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the first (and presumably only) time he'll do so during this 50th anniversary year.
- The Vatican's weeklong Lenten retreat from Feb. 17 through Feb. 23, in which time most normal functions are suspended.
- His regular Sunday Angelus address Feb. 24 and his regular Wednesday general audience Feb. 27. That event will be staged in St. Peter's Square in anticipation of an overflow crowd wanting to bid the pope farewell.

What will Benedict's role be in the election of his successor?

To hear Lombardi and others tell it, he won't have any role at all.

"Benedict XVI will surely say absolutely nothing about the process of election," Lombardi told the media. "He will be retired and will not interfere in any way in the process. You can be assured that the cardinals will be completely autonomous in their decision."

That said, Benedict's imprint is nevertheless destined to be on the conclave in two ways.

First, he has by now appointed the majority of the cardinals who will elect his successor (67 out of 117 who will be under 80 when the *sede vacante* begins and thus hold the right to vote). In that sense, one can

expect these are men who mostly share his outlook on things.

Second, because he's still alive, at least some cardinals may feel special pressure not to do anything that would be perceived as a repudiation of Benedict's papacy, or that they suspect would cause him consternation. How that might translate into choices inside the conclave isn't entirely clear, but it's a piece of the puzzle worth considering.

What will Benedict do after the new pope is on the job?

Here we're really in the realm of the hypothetical, because the only honest answer is that we just don't know.

It's reasonable to think that after some period of near-complete withdrawal to make it clear that the new pope is fully in charge, Benedict might want to resume writing on the scholarly and spiritual topics that have always been his passion.

Lombardi hinted at that possibility Tuesday, saying Benedict's long-awaited encyclical on faith (timed to coincide with the Year of Faith, and completing a triptych with his earlier works on love and hope) would not be ready to go before he steps down. He left open the possibility, however, that Benedict might be able to make use of this material in another form in a private capacity.

Whether Benedict will publish writings while he's still alive, however, or whether he'll take appointments, appear at Vatican events, or otherwise play some sort of public role, is all apparently still being pondered.

What are the implications of all this for future popes?

Once again, Vatican officials have been at pains to say that Benedict's is an "absolutely personal" choice, and that because every situation is different, it's impossible to say what future popes might do.

Lombardi made a special point today of stressing that Benedict wouldn't do anything to tie his successor's hands. He said, for instance, that while Benedict clearly wants a pope to be present at World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro in July, it will be up the next pontiff to freely decide if he wants to go or not.

(By the way, as of Tuesday, the official World Youth Day website still has a banner reading, "Pope to celebrate closing Mass." Lombardi has to concede that Benedict had told organizers "the pope" would be there, but laughingly added he never said it would be him.)

On the other hand, it's tough not to believe that Benedict XVI in some ways has set a precedent for the next time an aging pope finds himself facing diminishing strength and a set of challenges that arguably exceed his capacities. Italian radio Tuesday morning featured speculation that this could be a first step to a retirement age for pope, along the lines of the requirement for bishops to submit their resignations at 75.

That's one of the reasons some have styled Benedict's resignation a "collegial" act, meaning one that places the papacy more at the level of his fellow bishops rather than treating it as entirely beyond the rules that apply to other prelates.

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