

Cardinal says scandals may have influenced resignation

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 13, 2013 NCR Today

Benedict Resigns

Rome

Repeatedly over the last three days, media agencies have asked me to comment on the following question: Did Benedict XVI really resign just because he's old and tired, or was it really because of the sexual abuse crisis, the Vatileaks mess, and the various other meltdowns that have occurred on his watch?

My answer has been that it's not an either/or. Benedict may not have quit "because of" the pedophilia scandals or any other specific controversy, but it's hard to believe they didn't play a role, at least as background.

One can certainly take Benedict at his word that he feels his strength fading and simply believes he no longer has the capacity to do the job. Yet it defies reality to believe that the various sources of turmoil in the last seven years haven't taken a toll and that they help account for the fatigue he now feels.

It's clear they caused him anguish. Back in 2009, when his decision to lift the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops triggered a global firestorm when it turned out one of them was a Holocaust-denier, Benedict sent a letter to all the bishops of the world to explain what had happened. He apologized for the Vatican's handling of the situation and openly confessed his own consternation at the criticism it triggered.

"I was saddened by the fact that even Catholics who, after all, might have had a better knowledge of the situation, thought they had to attack me with open hostility," he wrote at one point. At another, he said he felt he had been treated in some quarters "hatefully, without misgiving or restraint."

Benedict is a realist, and he undoubtedly recognizes that breakdowns such as the Williamson affair suggest that something needs to be fixed in the internal management of the Vatican. His resignation suggests that given his age and perhaps his skill set, he's concluded he's not the one to fix it.

Today there was a sort of semi-confirmation of this reading of events from Portuguese Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, a veteran Vatican insider who's 80 and thus won't take part in the coming conclave. Italian journalist Andrea Tornielli asked Saraiva Martins if Vatileaks and the other scandals of the last couple of years might have been part of the reason Benedict reached this decision.

"I imagine they might have influenced it," Saraiva Martins said.

As revelations go, it's not exactly a thunderclap. It's the first time, however, that a Vatican cardinal has said out loud what pretty much everyone believes: The pope doesn't live in a vacuum, and if he finds himself weakening, the long list of fires he's struggled to put out has to be part of the reason why.