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Vatican works to get rumors on pope's resignation under control

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

Benedict Resigns

Rome — In what has become a daily exercise in rumor control, the Vatican spokesperson on Thursday shot down one hot bit of speculation about the resignation of Benedict XVI and confirmed another one about his life after the papacy.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi denied that an accident suffered by Benedict XVI during his trip to Mexico in March 2012 led to his decision to renounce the papacy, as was suggested in a piece today by a leading Italian Vatican writer.

Journalist Andrea Tornielli wrote this morning that while Benedict was staying in a residence of Capuchin sisters in León, Mexico, he got up during the night to use the bathroom and, because he couldn't quickly find the light switch, made his way in the dark. He hit his head on the sink, hard enough to cause bleeding.

As Tornielli reports, Benedict never complained of any pain and finished his program as scheduled. The incident was not revealed to the public.

In a briefing Thursday, Lombardi said he couldn't deny that the incident took place but insisted it was "not relevant" in the decision to step down.

Earlier in the week, the editor of the Vatican newspaper wrote that Benedict formed his intention to renounce his papacy after that grueling six-day trip to Mexico and Cuba.

On another front, Lombardi confirmed that Benedict will be accompanied to Castel Gandolfo on Feb. 28

and later to the monastery on Vatican grounds where he plans to live by Archbishop Georg Gänswein. The 56-year-old Gänswein is the pope's longtime personal secretary, and Benedict recently also made him the Prefect of the Papal Household, a position previously held by American Cardinal James Harvey.

Lombardi said Gänswein will continue to hold that position into the next papacy, presumably living in the monastery and going to work each day once Benedict gets settled.

That news led to an interesting question during the briefing. The Vatican has repeatedly said Benedict will not have any role in the next papacy, but a reporter asked Lombardi if the fact that his closest aide will also be running the papal household doesn't create an obvious channel to wield behind-the-scenes influence.

Lombardi's response was one of those rare moments when a Vatican official says something out loud that insiders know to be true but rarely dare to acknowledge publicly. In essence, Lombardi said being the Prefect of the Papal Household isn't that big of a deal.

"It's a very practical position, having to do with the pope's appointments," he said. "It is not involved in matters of governance."

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In other words, the prefect manages the flow of people moving in and out of the pope's presence, especially VIPs such as heads of state, but it's not as if he's necessarily at the pope's right hand when policy decisions are being made.

Lombardi's point was that the mere fact Gänswein holds the job doesn't mean he'll be carrying directives from Benedict XVI for his successor.

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