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Vatican: Conclave could be moved up

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 16, 2013 NCR Today
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Acknowledging that many people, including several cardinals, have questioned the need to wait until March 15 to open the conclave that will elect a successor to Pope Benedict XVI, a Vatican spokesperson on Saturday said the date is an "open question."

The apostolic constitution governing the papal election, *Universi dominici gregis*, issued under John Paul II in 1996, specifies that the conclave must take place between 15 and 20 days after the beginning of the *sede vacante* , meaning the end of the previous papacy. Since Benedict's resignation becomes official on Feb. 28, that would mean a conclave starting somewhere between March 15 and 20.

In previous sessions with the press this week, Vatican spokesperson Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi had left the impression that this provision of the rules was not open to revision.

In a briefing Saturday morning, however, Lombardi acknowledged that the waiting period was crafted with the expectation of a papal death, and is intended to give cardinals time to arrive in Rome. In 2005, 16 days passed between the death of John Paul II and the beginning of the conclave that elected Benedict XVI.

Under the present circumstances, however, cardinals know precisely when the *sede vacante* will begin, and some have suggested that the date could be moved up.

In Saturday's briefing, Lombardi said, "This question is being raised, and I can't deny it." He promised to inform the press as soon as a firm decision is made.

One hypothesis making the rounds is that the authorities who take control during an interregnum, meaning Cardinal Angelo Sodano as dean of the College of Cardinals and Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone as camerlengo, could propose an early date for the conclave and then put it up for a vote among all the cardinals present in Rome on the first day of the *sede vacante*, meaning March 1. In terms of what that date might be, some believe that Sunday, March 10, is a good candidate. It's a Sunday, and the "Mass for Electing the Pope" could be celebrated that day along with an opening ballot, while the real work would begin Monday.

Lombardi was not willing to offer a guess as to when a firm decision will be made.

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