

Papal candidate compares Benedict to Moses

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 18, 2013 NCR Today
Benedict Resigns

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Italian Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, widely considered a serious candidate to succeed Pope Benedict XVI, began his week-long series of talks for the Vatican's Lenten retreat last night with a tribute to the pope, using two Biblical images to compare his future role to that of Moses for the Israelites.

Expressing "our affection, our gratitude and our admiration" for Benedict, Ravasi said it's difficult to add much to the tributes already delivered by Italian Cardinals Angelo Sodano, dean of the College of Cardinals, and Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State.

It was Sodano who responded to Benedict's surprise resignation announcement last Monday, while Bertone delivered a brief tribute at Wednesday's Ash Wednesday service.

At the outset of his first reflection Sunday evening, Ravasi cited two Old Testament images of Moses, one from Exodus 17:12 and the other from Deuteronomy 34:7.

The Exodus passage describes a battle between Israel and Amalek, when Moses ascends a mountain and raises his arms in prayer. As long as his arms remain up, Israel prevails, but when they go down, Amalek gains the advantage. Eventually Aaron and Hur help Moses keep his arms up until sunset.

Ravasi described the passage as a symbol of Benedict's "future presence among us."

"It represents your principal function for the church" in retirement, Ravasi said, that of "intercession."

"We will remain in the valley where Amalek is, where there's dust, worries, terrors, and nightmares, but also hope, where you've been with us for the last eight years," Ravasi said.

"Every now and then, perhaps some of us can be like Aaron and Hur," he added, meaning to sustain Benedict in his prayer.

Ravasi also cited the passage from Deuteronomy, noting that it's one of the last passages in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. It says that Moses was 120 years old when he died, "yet his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated."

Ravasi called it "a great wish" for Benedict as well, noting that in the Jewish tradition of Biblical exegesis, commentaries on the passage contain "many very tender memories of Moses."

The Vatican's Lenten retreat continues through Saturday morning, with Ravasi delivering an average of three talks every day. Those talks are being made available as podcasts, in Italian, on the web site of Vatican Radio.

The 70-year-old Ravasi wins high marks for his intellect and his ability to deliver theological and scriptural messages in an accessible popular style, though some question his lack of practical pastoral experience. The former prefect of the Ambrosian Library in Milan and today president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, Ravasi has never led a diocese.

The Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, for instance, today quoted an unnamed Vatican insider as saying of Ravasi that he has a "great mind" and is an "exquisite person," but if you ask him how to run a parish, "he won't know what to say."

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