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NCR interview with Cardinal Francis George

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

Conclave 2013

Rome — One could make a strong case that Cardinal Francis George of Chicago is the closest thing the United States has to an "American Ratzinger," meaning the leading intellectual light among the current crop of prelates. Also like Benedict XVI, George is contemplating retirement, having turned 76 and already submitted his letter of resignation.

George is in Rome preparing to elect the next pope, and he sat down Saturday afternoon for an interview with NCR.

He's one of three American voters this time who also participated in the conclave eight years ago, and the only one still in office. The others are retired Cardinals Justin Rigali of Philadelphia and Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, both of whom have faced recent criticism related to their handling of the sexual abuse crisis. As a result, if any American is positioned to play the role of "kingmaker" in the 2013 conclave, it's arguably George.

One point that will be music to the ears of *vaticanisti* everywhere, meaning journalists specialized on the Vatican beat, is that George says the names of candidates currently showing up in the papers largely track with those figures the cardinals themselves are taking seriously. (In 2005, he said, that wasn't always the case.)

George repeated a point he's made to other media outlets, namely that "governance is the issue" heading into this conclave. He said the new pope will have to lead a serious reform of the Roman Curia, streamlining its procedures so that people's lives are not put on hold indefinitely, and restoring a sense of trust compromised by the Vatileaks affair.

‘Obviously something’s not working if the personal papers of the pope can be purloined from his desk and be printed in the media, including papers we’ve sent,’ George said.

(Those leaked documents included an encrypted cable from the papal embassy in Washington to the Secretariat of State, relaying a request from George asking that the Community of Sant’Egidio withdraw an award it planned to bestow on Gov. Pat Quinn of Illinois for suppressing the death penalty. According to the cable, George objected to Quinn’s positions on abortion and gay marriage, including policies about serving same-sex couples that effectively put Catholic adoption agencies in Illinois out of business.)

Other highlights from the interview include:

- George acknowledged that the private pre-conclave discussions among cardinals sometimes can turn ‘very critical,’ with a typical response to a candidate’s name being, ‘Yes, but ??’
- George said that there are people ‘who think [papal] resignation under any circumstances is not a good idea,’ and that Benedict’s decision has left the church ‘weakened.’ He stressed he doesn’t share that view.
- Right now George said he’s in the process of trying to ‘winnow down’ the field of candidates to 12 or 10 names, and that the process of trying to broker consensus among the cardinals around a particular candidate hasn’t yet started.
- Despite some reports to the contrary, George said he hasn’t heard anybody talk about electing a pope from outside the College of Cardinals, or from among the cardinals who are already over 80.
- George cited global vision, commitment to the New Evangelization, and a capacity to govern as the most important qualities in the next pope.
- He said factors such as age and nationality are ‘secondary.’
- It’s also important, George said, that the next pope be close to the poor.

Though George recently went through a round of chemotherapy to treat a form of cancer in the kidney, his latest check-up found him essentially cancer-free. The following is the full text of the interview with him, which took place at Rome’s North American College.

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What’s something about the conclave last time that you didn’t expect coming in?

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I really didn’t know what to expect, so the whole event was something of a surprise. Perhaps my greatest surprise was the emotion I felt, because I usually concentrate on ideas more than feelings, when someone was elected and accepted. There he was, now suddenly no longer Cardinal Ratzinger but the successor of Peter. Somebody had the keys. I realized how the church, in her mission, needs that role. More than that, I also felt very moved by listening to the passage from the Gospel according to St. Matthew, where Jesus says in chapter 16, ‘I give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.’ I thought to myself, this is the 265th person who has ever heard those words addressed to him personally, and here we are. It caught me by surprise that I was so deeply moved, but I was. I am even now, just thinking about it.

In terms of the process, including the discussions beforehand and how consensus was reached, did any of that catch you off guard?

I really wasn't on guard! I was just trying to find my way. I look back now and say I would have spent my time more profitably doing this rather than that. I suppose I wasn't sure going into the conclave that it would be as quiet and prayerful as it was. You read novels and hear stories about people standing up and saying, "Vote for so-and-so," or "I cast my votes for so-and-so." There was none of that at all.

You're talking about the experience inside the Sistine Chapel.

Yes. In the General Congregations and the more personal discussions, which were about people rather than just issues, there were arguments made for particular people. They didn't come from the people themselves, but from others. Even then, it was always with the sense that this isn't just my candidate, or somebody I know or who I think would be good for where I come from. It was, this is the candidate who would serve the whole church better than anyone else. That was always the tenor of the arguments, and it was impressive.

You were edified?

Yes, I was. At times, I was also a little taken aback by some of the criticisms. I didn't know [what to think], so you asked yourself, is that criticism fair? You have to go check with somebody else to ask, is this a fair criticism? People don't just say laudatory things. If you bring up a name, they also say, "Yes, but ??

You have to have that, don't you?

Of course you have to have it, but some of the reservations were very critical, and so I always wanted to check. I would ask, "You know him better than I do, what do you think?"

Your approach was to seek out somebody who knows that guy well?

Sure.

What's the central difference between the conclave of 2005 and this one?

The central difference is that the names out there, I've found, are all reasonable candidates. Last time there were a lot of names, and it seemed to me [the press] was searching for names. While there was truly more than one candidate going into the conclave, a lot of the names that had been discussed beforehand in the press were not serious candidates, and we all knew that. This time the names that are before us in the public media are, in fact, serious candidates. That's not to say they'll all stay that way, but for right now there are good reasons their names are out there. I mean a reason in terms of the church, and not just somebody wishing for something he or she would like to see happen.

Another difference is that this conclave follows resignation rather than death. Do you think that recalibrates the discussion?

It doesn't recalibrate the discussion in terms of whom we'll choose, but it does affect the discussion a little bit because the state of the church is different with a resigned pope than it would be if the pope had died.

Different in what way?

There are people who think resignation under any circumstances is not a good idea. They don't see this as something that leaves the church stronger, which I think it does, and obviously the former pope thinks it

does too. They see it as leaving the church weakened, and the state of the church is part of our conversation. In that sense, it enters into the deliberation.

As you know, last time only two cardinals had been in a conclave before, Cardinals Baum and Ratzinger. This time, there are fifty. Does that change things at all, in the sense that you have more guys wanting to be active participants?

I think that's probably true. In the conversations I've had, which have been mixed, those who have been through the conclave can speak about that experience. That does advance the conversation, especially for those who haven't been in the conclave. Last time, as you said, there was nobody who could advance the conversation in that way.

Does that make it easier to find consensus, or more difficult?

We haven't tried for consensus yet in the conversations I've been part of. You try at this point, or I do anyway, to winnow those names down to 10, 12, or less. The sooner you can do that, the better off you are. You can't do it too quickly, because you really have to listen.

One of the reasons we need some days in the General Congregations, and I don't know how many, is that you have to listen to the older men who have been through this. Most of those over 80 were in the last conclave, and they have some wisdom to share. It's the only chance they have to influence the voting, because they won't be in the conclave. You have to listen to that.

Let me run a couple of ideas past you that have been floated in the Italian papers. One is electing a pope from outside the College of Cardinals. Do you think there's any realistic possibility of that?

All I can say is that I haven't heard a name of anybody outside the college. That is a possibility, but whether it's realistic is another thing. I would imagine that might come up if there were a serious deadlock and they couldn't find a candidate in the college, but I've heard nobody talk about anybody outside the college as a candidate.

Another possibility that's been floated in the papers today is electing someone over 80, for a 'brief but strong' pontificate.

That too is a possibility, though I have to say I haven't heard any names. The names out in the press are not people over 80, and I haven't heard [other cardinals] talk about anybody over 80.

The idea in this piece is that it could be one of the three cardinals who investigated the Vatileaks scandal. [Note: Cardinals Julian Herranz, Paul Josef Tomko and Salvatore De Giorgi.]

They've written a report, but the next pope, whoever he is, will read that report. I presume he'll call them in and say, 'What's your advice?'

What's your sense of the most important challenges the next pope has to face?

To some extent, it depends on what part of the world we're talking about. The first challenge he has to face is how to become a universal pastor, so he can appreciate the different challenges from all parts of the world and try to respond as best he can.

Usually the popes have tried to respond through the local hierarchy. John Paul II trusted the local hierarchies to figure out what to do in a crisis, in a particular situation. The one where he had a very direct role was in Poland, in resolving the illegitimate government that had been imposed upon the country, but

that was his country. Otherwise he was very respectful of local hierarchies, and Benedict has been as well.

Primarily what Benedict wanted to do was to see to it that the teaching of the Second Vatican Council was recast in ways that would make it vital, but would also be faithful to the whole tradition, which he possessed so magnificently, and which he could synthesize around the concept of love. For instance, charity and love ? it used to be said that there was some kind of distinction between the two, as if charity were somehow second best, lady bountiful helping the poor rather than having them fight for their rights.

Some have argued that charity is actually at odds with justice, a means of keeping the poor dependent.

That's right. He just did away with that whole distinction, theoretically anyway, and he did it again and again, putting everything back into love and the joy that comes from it. He recast the tradition, but in ways that were entirely faithful to it, just as John Paul brought in a more personalist anthropology, so that natural law theory and the rest was recast in a relational form. Benedict has continued that.

Certainly the magisterial challenge of the New Evangelization is a universal one. It's been the subject of a synod [of bishops]. At that level, it's something the new pope has to face.

He also has to face the reform of the Roman Curia. It's clear that it's hard to govern well, no matter where you are in the world, if the connect to the central government isn't as strong as it might be because the central government isn't working as well as it should be.

How isn't the Vatican working?

Sometimes there are the traditional ways, meaning that the bureaucracy moves slowly. For example, the process of going to the Holy See for dispensations and permission has to be sped up, especially when you're talking about marriage. People's lives are on hold, and you can't keep people indefinitely stalled for whatever reason, whether it's inefficiency in the operation or something else. All I know is that people shouldn't have to wait months and months, sometimes years, to begin their life anew once they come to the church for help. That's true down the line, not just for marriage but other cases too where we have to come for permissions.

For some reason, the financial permissions seem to work more expeditiously than others, more personal requests.

You're talking, for instance, about permission to sell church property?

Right, you need permission to alienate church property beyond a certain sum. That seems to come back pretty quickly, whereas the more personal permissions don't. They *can* do it, so the next question is, why aren't they in other instances?

That slowness has always been the case, hasn't it?

Yes, but we can't afford it anymore. We're less patient, and the world moves faster than it once did.

Is there something else that isn't working?

Obviously something's not working if the personal papers of the pope can be purloined from his desk and be printed in the media, including papers we've sent. Somehow the next person has to restore confidence in confidentiality, where it's appropriate. There has to be transparency, but there are some papers that are confidential. We have a lawyer/client privilege in the United States that's sacred, and there's a reason for

that. There are other kinds of confidentiality that have to be respected because of the nature of the church. Sometimes it's matters of conscience. If you can't expect to have that, then the government is weakened in ways that leave us all unable to function as we should. That has to be addressed.

What does that logic lead to? Do you have to find a governing pope, or a pope who will appoint the right people to govern for him?

Both. He has to have some sense of how to govern, or else he won't choose people who will make the government work. Certainly the pope shouldn't be concerned with the nuts and bolts. That's supposed to be the *sostituto*, who's kind of like the moderator of the diocesan curia.

To use the secular term, chief of staff.

Yes. The people are what counts. The system worked under Paul VI, but of course he had a Benelli. [Archbishop Giovanni Benelli, later a cardinal, was Paul VI's *sostituto*.]

His name is very much in the air these days, as a shorthand for the kind of government people want back.

Yes, because he made it work. It so happens that you've got a system that could work, with the right people. I'm told he was resented ? I don't know, because I wasn't around ? but he made it work, so it's possible. It's especially important in the kind of instant communications world we live in. People are less patient, for good reason.

You've said global understanding, new evangelization, and reform of the Roman Curia. Would those be your top three concerns?

There's also personal stability, the depth of character founded upon his conversations with Jesus. There's got to be an identification with Jesus as shepherd of his church. The mystery of Jesus is infinite, but there's a certain dimension of it that's particularly necessary for being a pastor. Quite apart from personal sanctity, you have to know Jesus enough to represent him to his people, so it's governance. The issue is governance here.

Hopefully, he'll be a pious man ? he better be. Hopefully, he'll be an intelligent man. He should have a good open personality, which is very important. But all that comes together with the question, can he govern in Christ's name?

He also has to know the people. I've tried to say again and again, he has to have a heart for the poor around the world. Most Catholics live in poorer countries, and their agenda is very different. In those countries, the church is a beloved institution.

If you go to the world's poor, who aren't going to be on our television sets because they don't know English and they haven't had a liberal education, but if you go to the poorest of the poor and ask them about the Catholic church, they love the church. If you ask them about any country, their own or ours, it's a very different response. The church is a beloved institution among the people who count, who are first in the Kingdom of God. We can forget that too often, in my own country in particular.

The next pope must have a sense of that, among other things just to keep himself encouraged. It's a reminder that it does work, the mission is working. The gospel is preached, the sacraments are administered, people are gathered into communities of love. It works. He has to have the confidence born of that sense, that experience, that sort of experience, which will enable him to have the courage that John

Paul II showed in addressing the world, and that every evangelist shows. You can't start out all the time fighting with one hand behind your back. When there is a fight, you have to present the fullness of the truth.

Is it important how old the next pope is?

That's a secondary consideration, provided he has enough physical force to do the job well. The first thing, who is the person?

Nationality?

That's again a secondary consideration. I think most of us, out of courtesy, would see whether the Italians have someone, because the pope is the bishop of Rome. But the question is, is he able to rise above his culture in order to govern the universal church? There are probably Italians who can and Italians who can't, like anybody else. After that preliminary question of whether the Italians have somebody they really think should do the job, it doesn't make a lot of difference.

Is there anything else?

I always ask for prayers. As it gets closer and closer, it gets more and more intense. It takes over your mind and your spirit, in a way that's good, but it can also be troubling.

Because you know this is among the most momentous choices you'll ever make?

It's the last time I'll be in something like this. I kind of rode it out last time, and I was happy with it, but I have a sense that this time will be different. The church is differently positioned, and the enemies of the church are clearer. Therefore the demands on the next pope are going to be intense, so the choice is important.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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