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In Benedict's shadow, cardinals discuss next pope

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Conclave 2013

Rome — As the image of the first retired pope in centuries was seen publicly for the first time, the cardinals responsible for choosing his successor began to talk about what they want in the next leader of the Catholic church.

Meanwhile, a spokesperson for the U.S. bishops' conference said the U.S. cardinals in Rome have stopped their practice of daily briefings for the media. They had been one of the only open sources of information about the cardinals' proceedings other than official Vatican briefings.

The church's cardinals on Wednesday discussed "the expectations and hopes of the next pope," Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi said at a Vatican press conference.

Regardless, Lombardi said, a date for the conclave has not been set.

Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, who provided the English translation at the briefing, said the lack of a date for the vote should be interpreted as an atmosphere of prayer among the cardinals.

"Rather than trying to interpret the date of the conclave ... we should view this as a process of discernment and reflection," Rosica said. "We should not interpret this in any other way except through the dynamic of discernment and reflection."

Hours before the briefing Wednesday, Italian TV showed the first images of now-retired Pope Benedict since his renunciation of the papacy.

The emeritus pope walked through a garden in light rain at Castel Gandolfo, where he is living through

the duration of the conclave, wearing a white coat over a white cassock, a cane in his right hand. On his head, the former pontiff wore a white baseball cap. Archbishop Georg Ganswein, who remains the prefect of the papal household and Benedict's attendant, and a number of women religious accompanied him.

As the briefing began Wednesday, representatives for the U.S. bishops' conference announced that the American cardinals in Rome would no longer be holding press conferences as they had throughout the week.

"Concern was expressed in the General Congregation about leaks of confidential proceedings reported in Italian newspapers," said Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, director of media relations for the U.S. bishops. "As a precaution, the cardinals have agreed not to do interviews."

Rosica said the cardinals are "dealing with a journey" and "not ... with a congress or a synod during which we would try to give as much information as possible."

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Neither Rosica nor Lombardi "tell the cardinals what to do or what to say to the press," Rosica said. "There is a certain respect that grows" among the cardinals "as they get deeper into conversations."

"It is not up to us to judge what the cardinals are doing," Rosica said. "They make the decision among themselves in speaking with their brother cardinals."

At a press briefing Tuesday, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston said while he wanted to "honor the confidentiality of the discussion" among the cardinals, he thought the briefings hosted by the American cardinals are important, because he wanted to "let people know ... our folks back home that we are meeting day by day."

"There are interesting things happening," DiNardo said. "We are moving ahead. That kind of thing. Maybe [the need for a press briefing] is more an American thing."

The cardinals are expected to meet in general meetings again Thursday morning and afternoon. During those meetings, cardinals are free to sign up to speak at the meetings.

All proceedings are secret and the cardinals are under oath to keep the secrecy.

So far, Rosica said, there have been 51 speeches by the cardinals present. Among the themes: "The church in the world, new evangelization, the Holy See, dicasteries, relations with bishops."

From the discussions, Rosica said, a profile is emerging of "the expectations and hopes of the next pope."

Also mentioned at Wednesday's briefing were objections of an advocacy group for victims of clergy sexual abuse to the presence of some cardinals at the general meetings.

The U.S. group Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests said in a release Wednesday morning that at least 12 cardinals have poor records handling sex abuse and should not be considered as papal possibilities.

Among those listed by SNAP are Cardinal Angelo Sodano, who as dean of the College of Cardinals is leading their sessions this week, and retired Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony.

Sodano is known in Vatican circles for his stalwart defense of the late Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the founder of the Legionaries of Christ and a serial sex abuser.

As late as 2005, while the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was reaching the conclusion that Maciel was guilty, the Secretariat of State under Sodano issued a public statement denying there was any case against him.

Mahony has been at the center of controversy since February, when his diocese released under court order about 12,000 church files from the 1980s showing he had reassigned priests known to be abusers instead of reporting them.

"We are well aware of the positions of SNAP," Rosica said in response to a question on the matter. "But it really isn't up to SNAP ... to determine who should participate or not in the conclave."

Lombardi said Wednesday that 153 cardinals have now arrived in Rome to attend their daily meetings, among them 113 of the 115 cardinals expected to cast ballots for the next pope.

Missing of the electors are Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz of Warsaw, Poland, and Cardinal Jean-Baptiste Pham Minh Man from Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam.

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