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Conclave 2013: It's governance, stupid ? but who's the governor?

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All Things Catholic
Conclave 2013

Rome — Back in 1992, James Carville famously coined the phrase "It's the economy, stupid?" to remind the Clinton campaign staff of the winning issue in the race for the White House. If Carville were managing a campaign for the papacy in 2013, he might be inspired to coin a similar phrase: "It's governance, stupid.?"

If it wasn't already, it's become abundantly clear in the week since Benedict's papacy ended and the *sede vacante* began that governance -- or, if one prefers, business management -- is a titanic concern.

Yet if the 115 cardinals who will soon file into the Sistine Chapel seem in basic agreement about the question facing them, they don't appear to have an equally clear answer about who the right man is to be that governor.

Well before Benedict's surprise resignation announcement on Feb. 11, many cardinals were convinced that something was rotten in the Vatican bureaucracy. Speaking on background, many cardinals have grumbled that when bombs go off in Rome, they're the ones left to pick up the pieces in their dioceses and with their local and national media.

Privately, some cardinals feel that if Benedict XVI had better administrative support, he might not have felt compelled to resign. Speaking on background, one cardinal told *NCR* on Tuesday that he had raised the question in the General Congregation meetings of whether the cardinals had done enough to help Benedict -- by which he meant, in part, pressuring the pope's support team to get their act together.

Just in the past few days, the cardinals have had additional reminders of the point. They arrived in Rome last week to be greeted by explosive reports of a supposed "gay lobby" within the Vatican, allegedly based on a secret report prepared for Benedict XVI on the leaks scandal by three retired cardinals. While cardinals may be inclined to chalk those reports up to media sensationalism, they also realize it wouldn't have happened if somebody had prevented the leaks in the first place.

They've also watched as press briefings delivered by American cardinals were cancelled after concerns about leaks in the Italian papers. It struck many as the wrong solution, since the leaks weren't coming from those briefings, and it also made some Americans -- the second largest bloc in the conclave, with 11 votes -- even more inclined to support a shake-up.

The net effect has been to make "reform of the Roman curia" the shibboleth of the 2013 papal election, much like "continuity" was in 2005.

What do the cardinals mean by "reform"? Listening to them over the past week, both on and off the record, their version of reform seems to rest on three pillars.

- **Transparency:** Internally, they want a curia that's clearer about the logic for its decisions and about who's making them; externally, they want the Vatican to do a better job of communicating with the outside world, including greater savvy about how to engage the media.
- **Accountability:** Cardinals want to see the right people put into the right jobs, and then held accountable for poor performance. (Privately, many cardinals would concede that this wasn't Benedict's strong point, noting that he stuck with his Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, well after many of them were convinced his sell-by date had passed.)
- **Modernization:** Cardinals want a curia that's more in tune with 21st century standards of business management, including a capacity to process business in a timely fashion. Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, for instance, said in an NCR interview that the church can no longer afford the Vatican's traditionally glacial pace, because "we're less patient, and the world moves faster than it once did."

The problem is that a conclave can't stop with diagnosis. It also has to find a cure, meaning it has to figure out which candidate is most likely to deliver this sort of reform.

It's a quandary on three levels.

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First, holiness and a capacity to make the trains run on time don't often come wrapped in the same package. As Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese has said, the cardinals seem to want "Jesus Christ with an MBA." The problem is, if there's such a man among the 115 cardinal-electors, he hasn't yet stood up and said hello.

Second, it's not clear to everyone whether serious reform is more likely to come from an insider, who knows where the bodies are buried, or an outsider, who has no ties to the current regime and isn't involved in internal feuds. Ideally, many cardinals would like somebody who's had a taste of life inside the system, but who's not identified with its perceived dysfunction.

Once again, such figures are in short supply

Third, although central governance may be heading into the conclave, it's not the only item on the wish

list. Many cardinals also want a pope with global vision, for instance, who can embrace the two-thirds of the Catholic population living outside the West. They also want a pope for the New Evangelization, an effective missionary who can take the Catholic message to the street.

If you spot a candidate among the current crop who perfectly embodies all three of those qualities, drop a note to the College of Cardinals, because right now most cardinals don't seem to be seeing one.

As a result, the consensus is that the race is much more wide-open than in 2005. Chicago's George admitted as much the other day, saying that the list of candidates seems to be becoming longer rather than shorter. A large part of the reason the cardinals didn't want to rush setting a date for the conclave is because of concern that it could become a protracted affair, projecting images of gridlock and division.

Coincidentally, the 2013 conclave is unfolding at the same time as the Italian national elections, and many observers wonder if it risks the same fractious dynamics. It's obvious that Italians are frustrated with the system, as incumbent Prime Minister Mario Monti drew less than ten percent of the votes. The rest, however, were scattered more or less evenly among three different coalitions (including one led by a former comic who ran on an "up yours" platform), none of which seems inclined to work with the others.

Nobody seriously believes the conclave will end without a pope, like the Italian elections failed to produce a government, but there is concern that no single figure has emerged as the obvious answer to the question cardinals are asking: Who can fix the system, and still do all the other things we want the pope to do?

Between now and when the balloting begins, the cardinals seem to have their work cut out for them if they want to avoid a long and messy affair.

Read all of John Allen's papabile of the day stories here.

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