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Cardinals: Election of Pope Francis a sign of unity

by Joshua J. McElwee

Pope Francis

Rome — The election of Argentinean Jorge Mario Bergoglio as pope Wednesday night is a sign of the unity of the College of Cardinals and the belief they chose the right man to carry out the needs of the new evangelization, say two of the cardinals who were in the conclave that elected Pope Francis.

"If at the fifth vote the pope is elected, that means something," Austrian Christoph Schönborn told *NCR* on Thursday morning. "That means great unity, great agreement and a real move to the one we believe that is the chosen one."

The election is a sign the cardinals "experienced the guiding of the Holy Spirit," he said.

Bergoglio, formerly the archbishop of Buenos Aires, was elected the new bishop of Rome and leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics on Wednesday evening Rome time and took the name Francis.

His election came on the fifth ballot and second day of voting among the 115 cardinals who participated in the secret election. It was a surprisingly quick conclusion to a conclave that seemed to have no clear front-runner.

Australian Cardinal George Pell, also in the conclave that elected Bergoglio, said while Francis is "a simple man," he would also be a "formidable pope."

"He's able to make decisions; he's able to stick with them," Pell said at a press conference Thursday morning. "I think he'll be wise, but he's a formidable man. Argentina is a tough school. And he's done well there."

Pell said Francis' first public words as pontiff Wednesday night gave evidence he will be a "strong,

compassionate father."

Pope Francis' first word to a cheering crowd of an estimated 100,000 people in St. Peter's Square after the announcement of his election was "Buonasera," Italian for "Good evening."

Addressing the assembled as "brothers and sisters," he then bowed, asking for the crowd to pray for God to bless him as he began his papal ministry.

"From a man who has chosen to be the first Pope Francis, we can expect he will follow a certainly simplicity," Pell said Thursday.

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"We're all Christians together," Pell continued. "The leadership of the church, the papacy too, is a leadership of service. The pope is the servant of the servants of God. I'm sure that the Holy Father is well aware of this."

Bergoglio is the first pope to choose the name Francis for the 12th-century St. Francis of Assisi, known for his simple lifestyle and dedication to the works of mercy. He is also the first pope from the southern hemisphere and the first non-European pope in more than 1,200 years.

Schönborn said Bergoglio's choice of name was a sign of "the whole program of a life full of the vitality of the Gospel."

"There is a clear will and desire of an evangelical spirit," Schönborn said. "What we have all been speaking about new evangelization -- that these are not mere words, but that it's a real desire and I think Pope Francis stands for what we have been speaking about in the synod."

Schönborn was referring to last year's Synod of Bishops, which focused on "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith," a topic Pope Benedict had made central to his papacy.

Pell also focused on the issue of evangelization, saying he hoped the new pope would be able to make a visit to Asia, especially China.

"There's a whole new Christian world opening up in China," said Pell during the press briefing, held at the Domus Australia, a central Rome hotel owned by several Australian dioceses.

"Christianity is spreading, Protestant and Catholic, in China the way it spread through the Roman Empire," Pell continued.

Asked how Francis might handle questions regarding the governance of the Roman Curia, the bureaucrats who handle the day-to-day operations of the Vatican, Pell said the new pope would deal with them "appropriately and justly."

Going into the conclave, several cardinals told *NCR* that governance would be a key issue for the next pope, particularly after last year's trial of Pope Benedict's butler for leaking Vatican documents.

Three retired cardinals prepared a secret report on the matter and presented it to Benedict shortly before his renouncement of the papal chair Feb. 28, with the instruction that no one other than his successor would see it.

"This pope doesn't come in with any such explicit agenda," Pell said. "I anticipate that he will deal appropriately and justly with the report made by those three cardinals. And I think there's work to be done and I think he's the man to do it."

Pell said he does not think Benedict's resignation set a precedent.

"This is a job for life," he said. "It's only in an extraordinary situation of personal weakness, sickness that he will resign.

"I anticipate the resignation of Pope Benedict will remain an exception. It's one of the rarities in Catholic history. [Francis] certainly hasn't been appointed for a fixed term."

Pell also said he needed to "confess a weakness": "I take considerable pleasure in that he was scarcely on any of your lists," he said, referring to the surprise of many journalists at Bergoglio's election.

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