

Francis temporarily reappoints curial heads, mulls new appointments

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 17, 2013

Pope Francis

Rome

Although the early reaction to Pope Francis has been tremendously positive, it's largely based on matters of style and personality. The extent to which his expressed dream of a "poor church for the poor" will be translated into a program of governance remains to be seen.

So far, there have been two hints that the new pope sees himself as a genuine reformer, not just in words but also in deeds.

The first came in a meeting with journalists Saturday, when Francis said some of the cardinals had suggested he call himself Adrian VII after Pope Adrian VI in the 16th century, who tried to tackle the corruption and scandal that bred the Protestant Reformation.

The mere fact that cardinals suggested this to Francis hints at something that's been abundantly documented in other reporting: The new pope was elected on a reform mandate, beginning with a serious house-cleaning in the Roman Curia.

The other hint came in a brief two-line statement, also issued Saturday, that indicated Francis had decided to reappoint the Vatican officials who lost their jobs when the previous papacy ended, but was only doing so *donec aliter provideatur* -- "until other provisions are made."

"The Holy Father wants to reserve some time for reflection, prayer and dialogue before any definitive nominations or confirmations," the statement said.

Among Vatican insiders, the terse statement set off a minor earthquake because it seemed to put the old guard on notice that their sinecures might not be so secure after all.

By far, the most important appointment Pope Francis will make in the days to come is his Secretary of State, the figure who's more or less the prime minister in the Vatican system. Fairly or not, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State under Benedict XVI, is widely faulted for the failures in business management that have dogged Benedict's reign, and Francis' choice of a replacement thus looms as especially significant.

Some early speculation has fallen on Italian Cardinal Fernando Filoni as a possible choice. If so, it would arguably be in keeping with the new pope's character: Filoni, 66, was the lone Western diplomat to remain on the ground in Baghdad in 2003 when he was serving as the papal ambassador and the bombs began to fall.

Filoni later refused to travel around with an armed escort, saying he wanted to be seen "as an Iraqi, by the Iraqis."

Despite being a career Vatican bureaucrat, Filoni had a falling out with Bertone, so he would be perceived as a

break with the past.

Another oft-mentioned possibility is Archbishop Pietro Parolin, currently the pope's ambassador to Venezuela and the Vatican's former under-secretary for relations with states. Until being shipped off to Latin America in 2009, Parolin had the reputation of being the brains behind most Vatican diplomatic initiatives, one of the few people one could engage in the Secretariat of State with the energy and imagination to get things done.

Other candidates being floated include Cardinal Giuseppe Bertello, head of the Vatican City State, and Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, the papal ambassador to Colombia. Balestrero was the architect of the Vatican's effort to meet global anti-money-laundering standards, and like Parolin, was seen as the best and brightest within the Secretariat of State before being sent packing.

Of course, the election of Francis himself was a long shot, and there's no reason not to think he might produce another surprise in his choice for this key role.

One way to do that, of course, would be to pick someone from outside Italy, which would mean that the top two Vatican positions would be held by non-Italians. In the eyes of the old guard, that would be the stuff of a real revolution.

Another important choice will be whether Francis intends to name a private secretary, and if so, who it might be. In the last two pontificates, Stanislaw Dziwisz and Georg Gänswein, secretaries to John Paul II and Benedict XVI, respectively, were powerful behind-the-scenes figures who controlled access to the pope and interpreted his mind on sensitive matters.

Francis did not have a private secretary in Argentina, and it remains to be seen whether he'll name one here.

Most observers do not expect Pope Francis to make any significant personnel moves until the Easter celebrations are concluded. After that, however, many believe serious change could be in the offing.

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