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Does Francis face a risk of Vatican backlash?

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today
Pope Francis

Rome — Yesterday I found myself sitting in a Vatican office chatting with a mid-level official, at roughly the hour rumors began to make the rounds that Francis would not be doling out the bonuses customarily paid to personnel after a papal transition.

This official rolled his eyes and snipped, "What's next, sackcloth and ashes?"

The official, who's worked in the Vatican for the better part of twenty years, acknowledged that financial times are tight, and in itself skipping a bonus isn't terribly cataclysmic. (He did say, however, that he'd been counting on the bonus to fund his annual trip home, and wasn't sure now how he'd swing it.)

He also said he realizes Francis was elected on an anti-establishment mandate to shake things up in the Vatican, and conceded that administrative missteps over the last eight years have made the case for some kind of reform abundantly clear.

At the same time, he said, the grunt work of keeping the institutional machinery working isn't anybody's idea of a pleasure cruise, and it's nice once in a while to get some affirmation from the boss.

Nobody's getting rich working in the Vatican, he insisted, given that a typical mid-level official probably earns in the neighborhood of 20,000 Euro, and personnel generally draw public reactions to their work only when somebody's unhappy with it.

What typically gets officials through difficult moments, this veteran said, is the sense that the pope has their back.

What will happen to the system, the official wondered out loud, if the people who make it run on a daily basis get the impression that the pope is instead boosting his own popularity at their expense?

This was, of course, merely one reaction from more than 2,700 people who work in the Roman Curia. Yet it hints at a tension Francis will have to navigate as he sets about trying to implement the reform mandate upon which he was elected: Changing the system, without alienating the people he'll have to depend upon to make things work.

Yesterday, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, confirmed that Vatican personnel will not be receiving the usual bumps in pay that coincide with the end of one papacy and the beginning of another. (Those payouts have generally gone both to the personnel of the Roman Curia and to the roughly 1,800 employees of the Vatican City State, for a total of about 4,500 folks.)

Eight years ago, workers got 1,000 Euro for the death of John Paul II and another 500 Euro for the election of Benedict XVI, payments which in part are intended to compensate people for the extra hours and stress of the transition.

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This time around, however, Lombardi said the overall economic situation made it "neither possible nor opportune" to dole out bonuses. The savings are considerable — doing the math, assigning a bonus of 1,500 Euro to a total workforce of 4,500 people would mean a payout of around 6.75 million Euro, almost U.S. \$9 million. (The Vatican indicated that the pope will instead make an expanded donation to charitable causes.)

On its own, the missed bonus is likely a blip on the radar screen. The larger question is whether in continuing to send signals of a break with business as usual, Francis may face the risk of internal backlash.

A week ago today, Francis made a visit to the Secretariat of State, by tradition the Vatican's most important management office, to express "sincere and cordial gratitude" for the work officials had put in during the transition period. He thanked them for their "unpayable" commitment, a phrase that obviously seems a bit ironic now.

Generally speaking, popes have felt obligated to defend their aides in the Vatican when they're under fire, realizing that they're ultimately dependent on them to get things done. In his final General Audience on Feb. 27, for instance, Benedict XVI went out of his way to thank Vatican personnel for their "generosity and love of God and the church."

"There are so many faces that one never sees, that remain in the shadows, but precisely in their silence and daily dedication, with a spirit of faith and humility, they were a sure and trustworthy support for me," he said.

Benedict made the remarks knowing full well that in the avalanche of commentary triggered by his resignation, many analysts suggested that if he had had better administrative support his papacy might not have been so taxing.

The inevitable truth any pope must face is that if the Vatican didn't exist, it would have to be invented. Holding a far-flung church of 1.2 billion members around the world together requires some kind of central office, and whatever Francis' reform ends up looking like, there will still be a need for a small

corps of officials in Rome to implement it.

Having now tightened some belts in the Holy See, Francis may also be challenged to find other ways to express support for the people who will either make his papacy take off, or who could end up getting in its way.

It's also a broader lesson in papal leadership: Gestures that play extremely well with the broader public sometimes come at an internal cost, and balancing the books in terms of one's political capital is rarely easy.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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