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What to do about Sodano?

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 6, 2011 All Things Catholic

In Rome and in Catholic circles around the world, a question is quietly circulating which only Pope Benedict XVI can answer: What to do about Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Pope John Paul II's former Secretary of State, who still holds the post of Dean of the College of Cardinals?

Were Benedict to die today, it would be Sodano, 83, who presides over the daily General Congregation meetings of the cardinals, which shape the discussions leading into the election of the next pope. It would also be Sodano who would preside over the funeral Mass for the deceased pope, and who would celebrate the Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, the "Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff," which is the final public act before the conclave.

Sodano, in other words, would be the face of the Catholic church during the papal interregnum -- a time when the eyes of the entire world are squarely upon Rome.

What's the problem with that? In a nutshell, Sodano has a troubling record of both words and deeds on the sexual abuse crisis. Granted, he's not generated the public backlash that, say, Cardinal Bernard Law faced in Boston. Yet if Sodano is front and center during the interregnum, his history could easily be spun into a cause célèbre.

In some ways, of course, it's unfair to reduce Sodano's legacy entirely to his profile on the crisis. He had a long, albeit controversial, diplomatic career (his role vis-à-vis the Pinochet regime in Chile as nuncio from 1978 to 1988 is still debated), and he served John Paul II for 15 years in one of the Vatican's most complex posts.

In the eyes of the people most scandalized by the sexual abuse crisis, however, Sodano has become a symbol of the ambivalence and denial they still associate with the Vatican's response.

First, Sodano is known as perhaps the most stalwart defender in the Vatican of the late Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ. The Legionaries have acknowledged that Maciel was guilty of a wide range of misconduct, including the sexual abuse of former members. As late as 2005, while the 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.

Second, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna charged in May 2010 that it was Sodano who blocked an investigation against Schönborn's predecessor, Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër, when Groër faced charges of

sexual abuse in the 1990s. (At the time, Schönborn and other Austrian bishops announced they were "morally convinced" of Groër's guilt.) Although Schönborn later apologized for publicly reprimanding a fellow cardinal, he never retracted the substance of the charge.

Third, it was Sodano who sparked international outrage last year by using a platform during Pope Benedict's Easter Mass to compare criticism of the church on the sexual abuse crisis to "petty gossip."

That dismissal seemed at odds with Benedict's own commentary, including his famous reference on Good Friday in 2005 to "filth" in the church. In fact, the furor over Sodano's "petty gossip" line didn't really die down until Benedict fielded a question en route to Fatima, Portugal, and replied that the real problem is not attacks from the outside but "the reality of sin inside the church."

Fourth, Sodano recently roiled the waters again with his response to a question about Maciel during the run-up to John Paul's beatification.

"How can you, in such a great moment, get into such peripheral issues when the world is applauding the pope?" Sodano said on the sidelines of a Vatican exhibit honoring the late pope. "I'm stunned."

Whatever Sodano may have meant, the take-away for many people was that Sodano had called the suffering of sexual abuse victims a "peripheral" concern.

Beyond those points, there's also the whiff of financial scandal. In 2008, an Italian businessman Raffaello Follieri was sentenced to four and a half years in prison in New York for cheating investors out of millions of dollars. He built the scheme by playing off Vatican ties, in particular to Sodano.

No doubt, those inclined to give Sodano the benefit of the doubt could argue that there are ways to explain all this. The fact remains, however, that in terms of public perceptions, having Cardinal Angelo Sodano front and center whenever the pope dies would be counter-productive for a church trying to convince the world that it's turned a corner.

What could Benedict XVI do? In theory there are at least three possibilities, though one is fairly far-fetched.

First, Benedict could revoke Sodano's status as a cardinal. That's an extreme step, but there is precedent for it. (As Cardinal Francis George of Chicago recently said in an *NCR* interview, "Everything has happened in the church at least once.")

Back in September 1927, Pope Pius XI took away the red hat from Cardinal Louis Billot of France, who had balked at Pius' decree to withdraw Catholic support from the right-wing monarchist *Action Française* movement. (Pius felt some of the leaders of the movement were manipulating the church to score political points.)

Such a step with Sodano, however, is deeply improbable. For one thing, he and Ratzinger served together under John Paul, and Sodano was actually Benedict's Secretary of State in the early part of his papacy. Further, it's not clear that Sodano is guilty of direct defiance of papal authority so much as suspect judgment.

Second, Benedict XVI could quietly ask Sodano to resign as Dean of the College of Cardinals. Cardinal Bernard Gantin did that back in November 2002, returning to his native Benin, where he died in 2008.

Should Sodano step aside, the five remaining cardinal-bishops would elect one of their number to take over. The most likely choice would be French Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, 88, currently the vice-dean. Despite his age, Etchegaray is in good health. Moreover, he's a veteran goodwill ambassador for the Vatican, with a gracious and

affable personality and no troubling history on the sexual abuse crisis.

The other cardinal-bishops are Giovanni Battista Re, Francis Arinze, Tarcisio Bertone and José Saraiva Martins. Frankly, none of them would bring quite the baggage on the sex abuse crisis as Sodano.

Third, Benedict could do what his predecessors Paul VI and John Paul II each did, which is to issue his own document updating the procedures for the next conclave. Benedict issued a *motu proprio* in June 2007 restoring the absolute requirement for a two-thirds vote to be elected pope, but otherwise left John Paul's 1996 document *Universi Dominici gregis* untouched.

Were Benedict to issue such a document, he could modify the role of the Dean of the College of Cardinals, perhaps specifying that the cardinals can elect whoever they like to celebrate the public Masses and to chair the General Congregation meetings. That way, Benedict could make the move seem less like a personal indictment of Sodano and more like a general shift in favor of collegiality.

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Whatever happens, many Catholic insiders are hoping Benedict does something.

By definition, the death of a pope and the election of another is a time of intense public scrutiny for the church. The last thing most Catholic leaders want to be doing when that happens is trying to put out an unnecessary, and damaging, PR fire.

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