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With two weeks left, what will Benedict do?

Joshua J. McElwee | Feb. 12, 2013
Benedict Resigns
Analysis

Until the moment of his resignation at 8 p.m. Rome time Feb. 28, the Vatican says Pope Benedict XVI is fully on the job as supreme pastor of the Roman Catholic church.

But as the first *pontifex maximus* to effectively give two weeks' notice, what exactly will he be doing?

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, said in a press bulletin Tuesday the pope intends to at least maintain his current public schedule, which includes a public service to mark the beginning of Lent Wednesday and a number of visits over coming days with pastors in Rome and bishops throughout Italy.

What Lombardi didn't answer is whether the pope intends to use his remaining time to direct the functioning of the various Vatican offices, over which he has final governance and alone can give explicit orders.

Until Feb. 28, those offices essentially face a ticking clock. Once Benedict formally steps aside, their leaders must resign and all their work, except that considered most essential for the basic functioning of the church, must come to a halt.

Among offices facing the clock are the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops, responsible for recommending priests for appointments as bishops in places throughout the world, and the powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, known for acting as the church's doctrinal watchdog.

For pope-watchers in the U.S., how Benedict decides to use the time between now and his resignation can have major and lasting significance.

Several U.S. dioceses and archdioceses are due or overdue to receive new bishops, either because they do not have leaders or because their leaders have reached the mandatory retirement age of 75.

Chicago, where Cardinal Francis George is 76 but has been allowed to stay on until now, is one prominent example.

Louisville, Ky., Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, who also serves as the vice president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has been mentioned as one possible replacement for George.

Commenting on that fact, Peter Smith, a noted religion reporter for Louisville's *Courier-Journal* newspaper, asked Tuesday [1] whether Benedict plans "to make some final major personnel moves as a coda on his tenure."

"Or does Benedict now see himself as a caretaker," Smith continued, "leaving it to his successor to make any major initiatives that the latter will have to live with?"

Initial indicators seem to point to the pope continuing to make at least some personnel moves. In its daily

bulletin Tuesday, the Vatican announced the pope had appointed Monday a new auxiliary bishop for the U.S. archdiocese for the military services, which is tasked with ministering to U.S. service members.

Among 12 U.S. dioceses currently vacant and possibly in the running for new bishops are Bridgeport, Conn.; Oakland, Calif.; Rochester, N.Y.; and Portland, Maine.

Another bishop and diocese possibly awaiting papal action is Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., where Bishop Robert Finn in September became the first U.S. prelate [2] convicted of a crime for his actions shielding a priest accused of sexual impropriety.

Finn was found guilty by local authorities of one misdemeanor charge of failing to report suspected child abuse Sept. 6 over his delay in reporting Fr. Shawn Ratigan, a diocesan priest who was known to have taken naked photographs of underage girls.

Kristine Ward, chair of the National Survivor Advocates Coalition, wrote Tuesday [3] that the first move of the next pope should be a "papal balcony announcement" of Finn's removal, but Benedict could be looking to act earlier -- perhaps as a last-minute shoring up of his record on fighting clergy sex abuse.

Complicating issues on that and other bishop-appointing matters is the fact that Cardinal Marc Ouellet, the former archbishop of Quebec who as the head of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops is the pope's key adviser on appointments, is considered [4] a front-runner possibility to be the next pope.

As such, Ouellet might not be looking to make too many waves before the conclave of cardinals who will elect the next pontiff, expected to begin [5] between March 15-20.

Other actions Benedict could conceivably take in coming days might affect U.S. Catholic sisters.

If Benedict is looking to repair what might be seen as fraught relations with sisters, he could theoretically order Archbishop Gerhard Müller, leader of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to make some sort of overture.

In April 2012, Gerhard's predecessor, Cardinal William Levada, sharply criticized the main representative organization of U.S. sisters, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

In a move that criticized widely as both inappropriate and unfounded, Levada also ordered the group to submit to the authority of three U.S. bishops.

While the leader of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is typically made a cardinal, Müller, who was appointed to the post in July, has not yet received a red hat.

Of course, no one knows the outgoing pope's intentions. But no matter what they are, the clock is ticking.

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