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A critical tone among cardinals begins to emerge

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 15, 2013 NCR Today
Benedict Resigns
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Earlier this week, I suggested that because the end of Benedict XVI's papacy is not occurring in tandem with his death, it may create greater psychological space for cardinals to take a critical look at the pontificate, without fear of speaking ill of the late pontiff.

A small confirmation of that theory has come in the form of an interview given to a German newspaper by Cardinal Joachim Meisner of Cologne, one of Benedict's closest friends in the College of Cardinals.

In the context of describing what qualities the next pope might need, Meisner revealed that in 2009, he approached Benedict on behalf of a number of cardinals to ask him to dump his Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone.

Bertone, now 78, had served under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1995 to 2002, and his appointment as Secretary of State in 2006 sent off shock waves inside the Vatican because he didn't come out of the diplomatic corps and had no prior experience in those circles. The Secretary of State is generally considered the pope's "Prime Minister" the second most powerful official in the Vatican after the pope himself.

Throughout Benedict's papacy, Bertone shouldered much of the blame for what is widely perceived as a series of gaffes and meltdowns. He's become the leading symbol of the convention wisdom that Benedict has been a great teaching pope, but a mixed bag as a governor and administrator.

In 2009, a global tempest erupted following Benedict's decision to lift the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops, including one who turned out to be a Holocaust denier. Benedict was compelled to send an anguished letter to the bishops of the world, apologizing for mishandling the affair but also grousing about the bitter backlash it generated.

Insiders blamed Bertone for not seeing the train wreck coming, which was the context for Meisner's effort to get Benedict to cut him loose.

According to the interview in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Mesiner told Benedict: "Your Holiness, you have to make Cardinal Bertone resign! He has the responsibility, like in a secular government.'

According to Meisner, Benedict's response was: "Listen to me carefully. Bertone will remain! Enough, enough, enough."

"After that, I didn't bring up the subject again," Meisner is quoted as saying. "It's typical: The Ratzingers are loyal, and that doesn't always make their life easy."

To be sure, this was not a direct criticism of Benedict ? on the contrary, Meisner seems to admire his loyalty to his friends. Yet it certainly is a critique of the team around Benedict, and perhaps a not-so-subtle hint that the next pope needs to have a better eye for managerial talent, and a more robust sense of accountability for poor performance.

Needless to say, the Meisner interview also probably isn't a big boost for Bertone's electoral chances.

In response to another question, Meisner said the next pope should have Benedict's intellectual and cultural depth, but be a younger man ? "No more than 70," he's quoted as saying.

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