

After unfocused meetings, cardinals to vote for pope next week

Joshua J. McElwee | Mar. 8, 2013 NCR Today
Conclave 2013
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The cardinals of the Roman Catholic church will vote to elect a new leader for the world's 1.2 billion Catholics at the beginning of next week, the Vatican announced Friday.

The vote, widely anticipated after five days of secret deliberations by the college of cardinals gathered in Rome, could begin "Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday," a spokesman said at a daily press briefing.

A decision on the start date of the vote was expected after another meeting of the cardinals Friday evening, said Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, who is providing English translation during the briefings. An announcement, Rosica said, could be expected at about 7 p.m. Rome time (1 p.m. USA eastern time).

The cardinals met Friday morning for the seventh time since Pope Benedict XVI's resignation. They are meeting daily before entering the conclave in the Sistine Chapel during which they will vote to elect a new pope.

News of the forthcoming date comes after reporting that the cardinals' meetings this week have been unfocused, with little general agreement about what is required in the next Roman pontiff.

The Vatican said Friday that 153 cardinals are now in Rome for the meetings, including all 115 of those expected to vote for the next pope.

All cardinals under the age of 80, numbering 117, are eligible to vote. Two have indicated they will not, including Scottish Cardinal Keith O'Brien after allegations by several priests and a former priest surfaced accusing him of improper sexual conduct.

The first act of the cardinals Friday morning was to formally accept the missing cardinals' reasons for not attending, said Rosica.

Indonesia's Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja of Jakarta has declined to attend for health reasons.

O'Brien asked to be excused "for personal reasons. Those reasons have been made known through a public statement he has made," Rosica said.

More than 100 cardinals have spoken during time-slots provided at the daily meetings, known as general congregations, Rosica said. The meetings are secret and the cardinals are sworn to an oath of secrecy.

Wide attention has been paid to any indications about what the cardinals have said during those meetings as an indication of what they may be looking for in the next pope.

While the Vatican briefings have explained the subjects of conversation in broad terms -- interreligious dialog, ecumenism, collegiality, "a positive proclamation of love and mercy" -- reports in Italian papers have indicated

the cardinals have spoken at length about last year's leak of Vatican documents and the subsequent trial of the papal valet.

After a series of popular press briefings by U.S. cardinals taking part in the meetings was canceled in order to stem leaks about the conversations, focus shifted to whether there had been disagreements over the matter between the cardinals of the different nations.

Asked pointedly at Thursday's Vatican briefing "why Americans were doing penance for the Italian cardinals," Rosica said it was "not up to" the Vatican spokesmen to settle potential disputes between national conferences.

Once the conclave opens next week, the cardinals will be moved to a special Vatican hotel and will be kept to an even stricter code of secrecy.

Voting will take place in the Sistine Chapel, which has been specially retrofitted for the purpose with a more age-friendly elevated floor, electronic jamming technology, and two furnaces to burn the cardinals' votes after each ballot.

The first day of the conclave begins with a special Mass for the election of a new pope and a spiritual reflection. The cardinals then cast one ballot that day.

On subsequent days, the cardinals can have up to four rounds of voting, two each in the morning and afternoon. If by the third day they do not reach the two-thirds majority required for the election of a new pontiff -- 77 of the 115 voting -- voting is halted for a day of prayer.

Recent elections have seen a development towards shorting voting times. In 2005, when Pope Benedict was elected, the election took less than 24 hours.

The longest conclave took nearly three years, when cardinals voting for the successor to Pope Clement IV met from November 1268 until September 1271.

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/joshjmac [1].]

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