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What Congress could learn from the papal conclave

Thomas Reese | Mar. 12, 2013 NCR Today
Conclave 2013

In Rome, as the College of Cardinals enters the conclave this evening to begin its work electing a new pope, in the United States, Congress continues to be incapable of resolving the political and budgetary crisis caused by sequestration. The cardinals will probably only take a few days to elect a pope, but by the time the conclave is over, Congress may still be deadlocked in its efforts to pass a budget, much to the embarrassment of the nation.

In the 13th Century, the Catholic Church faced similar embarrassment when the College of Cardinals proved incapable of electing someone to be the successor of St. Peter. Like the U.S. Senate, the College of Cardinals has a two-thirds rule and it is not always easy to find someone who can get enough votes. It took them a year and a half to elect Innocent IV in 1243 and three and a half years before Gregory X was installed in 1271. The first election took place in Rome while the second took place in Viterbo, a small town 50 miles north of Rome.

One reason the cardinals were slow to elect a pope is that they controlled the papacy's money during the interregnum and they preferred partying to doing their duty. These were also perilous times with kings and rulers fighting over the papacy and the Papal States.

Needless to say, the people in the pews were no happier with the cardinals than American citizens are happy with members of Congress. The Romans revolted and locked the cardinals up until they finally elected a pope. The word "conclave" comes from the Latin for "locked with a key." The citizens of Viterbo did the same when they got fed up with inaction by the cardinals, but the cardinals still delayed, so the people cut the cardinals' food down to one meal a day. When that did not work, they put them on bread and water. Finally they tore the roof off the building where the cardinals were staying, leaving them open to the elements. Finally, "Habemus Papam."

The church eventually enshrined these practices into law. The last conclave to go more than four days was in 1831. Today during a conclave the cardinals live inside the Vatican, cut off from the outside world without telephones, television or Internet. No newspapers or mail goes in our out of the conclave. At the conclave there is also electronic jamming equipment to enforce these rules and suppress bugs.

The United States could learn from the Catholic Church on how to get leaders to do their duty. The lesson is clear. If you want a budget, lock up the Congress, take away their cellphones and Internet, don't let them go to fund raisers, and if necessary put them on bread and water until they pass a budget. It has worked for hundreds of years in the Catholic Church, it might even work in Washington.

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