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The Tablet parts ways with longtime Vatican analyst Robert Mickens

Joshua J. McElwee | Apr. 24, 2014

The weekly British Catholic magazine *The Tablet* and its Rome correspondent Robert Mickens, an American who is a longtime Vatican analyst, have severed ties after nine years of working together.

The publication announced the news on its website Thursday [1] and also tweeted an announcement [2].

Separation by Mickens and *The Tablet* comes after the magazine announced March 25 on Twitter that it had suspended the writer, claiming it needed to conduct an investigation of a comment Mickens made on Facebook.

"After serious consideration, *The Tablet* and Robert Mickens have come to a mutual agreement that he will no longer be the journal's Rome correspondent," reads the official statement posted by the publication on its website [1].

The statement, titled "Message to readers: Robert Mickens," was also printed in the magazine's latest print issue.

In an email to colleagues Thursday, Mickens thanked them for their "prayers and words of concern these past weeks since my 'suspension' on 25 March and now the resolution of my status with the paper I've been working for the past nine years."

"I will keep you informed of my future endeavors as they become clearer," he said.

Mickens has lived in Rome since 1986, first arriving as an American seminarian before deciding not to pursue the priesthood. He worked at Vatican Radio from 1989 to 2000, traveling often with Pope John Paul II, producing radio shows, and doing live commentary of papal liturgies.

He first worked for *The Tablet* from 2000 to 2003 before moving to Geneva to work in the communications office for Franciscans International, a nongovernmental organization with consultative status at the United Nations.

Mickens returned to *The Tablet* beginning in 2005, where he has written both reported news stories from the Vatican and a popular column, known as "Letter from Rome."

Catherine Pepinster, *Tablet* editor, referred to that letter last fall as "one of our most popular regular features," according to the publication's readers' surveys, when introducing [3] Mickens at a talk in London.

The Tablet initially suspended Mickens following a British blog post that criticized a comment he made on Facebook to a picture showing Cardinal Loris Capovilla, an Italian prelate who served as the papal secretary to Pope John XXIII.

Pope Francis made Capovilla a cardinal along with 18 other prelates in a ceremony Feb. 22 at the Vatican. At 98, the Italian is the oldest member of the College of Cardinals.

In the Facebook comment, Mickens wrote: "This should have happened a long time ago." Apparently referring to both Capovilla and to retired Pope Benedict XVI, the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Mickens continued: "Do [you] think he'll make it to the Rat's funeral?"

Damian Thompson, a columnist and blogger for Britain's *Daily Telegraph*, made the first posting [4] of the comment March 24, calling it part of a "disgusting exchange." Thompson then repeatedly tweeted links to his blog post in subsequent days, sometimes misconstruing Mickens' comment with the comment of another person on the photo.

In its first announcement of Mickens' suspension, *The Tablet* simply stated in a tweet that Mickens had been suspended "following a comment on Facebook." It said "an enquiry is underway."

The magazine has not since given more details about that enquiry.

Other longtime Catholic journalists expressed anger with the announcement Thursday. In one example, Religion News Service's national reporter, David Gibson, responded to *The Tablet*'s tweet [5]: "Shameful decision by the Tablet. The charges were false. Your loss."

While Mickens has not announced whether he will be writing for another publication, he is expected to continue providing regular commentary on television for the British broadcaster BBC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and the Irish broadcaster RTE.

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[2] https://twitter.com/The_Tablet/status/459356149356462080
[3] http://www.thetablet.co.uk/other/the-tablet-lecture-2013
[4] http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/damianthompson/100264842/do-you-think-hell-make-it-to-the-rats-funeral/
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