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Slovaks rally for fired archbishop

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 16, 2012

Adding a new name to the growing list of bishops fired by Pope Benedict XVI, Archbishop Róbert Bezák of Trnava, Slovakia, was deposed on July 2, setting off protests and rallies in support of the ousted prelate in this overwhelmingly Catholic nation.

A 52-year-old Redemptorist, Bezák had served as archbishop of Trnava, considered the cradle of Catholicism in Slovakia, since 2009. A terse one-sentence Vatican statement did not offer any explanation for the move.

On July 6, hundreds of Slovaks attended a rally in support of Bezák. According to press reports, many carried flowers and photos of Bezák, which they placed on the square in Trnava?s town center. More than 6,700 people have signed an Internet petition backing the deposed prelate, and some parish priests have reportedly offered their resignation in protest.

According to Slovak press reports, the Internet petition asserts that ?we require [an] explanation, since this is an abnormal procedure which creates space for various suspicions. ... This procedure does not throw a good light on the institution of the Church, [and] it divides and disgusts believers as well as society.?

A handful of Catholics reportedly boycotted Sunday Mass on July 8, joined by a Protestant pastor.

In the absence of an official rationale, some Slovak observers have speculated that the Vatican faulted Bezák for poor management and dividing the archdiocese. Others, however, believe Bezák was brought down by forces loyal to his controversial predecessor, Archbishop Ján Sokol, now 78, who governed the Trnava archdiocese from 1989 to 2009.

Sokol is seen as considerably more conservative, leading some to suspect an ideological motive. In addition, Bezák had complained of difficulties in accounting for missing funds from the period Sokol was in charge. On July 6, Slovakian civil prosecutors announced they were opening an investigation into charges of misappropriation under Sokol.

Sokol had also been criticized over his alleged collaboration with the Czechoslovak communist secret police during the Soviet era, and for praising Jozef Tiso (1887-1947), president of the wartime Slovakia, a client state of Nazi Germany, who was convicted of war crimes and hanged after the war.

The July 2 action against Bezák marks the fourth time in just the last year that Benedict has deposed a bishop.

The other cases have been:

- Bishop Jean-Claude Makaya Loembe of Pointe-Noire in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in March

2011;
- Bishop William Morris of Toowoomba, Australia, in May 2011;
- Bishop Francesco Micciché of Trapani, Italy, in May 2012.

With Makaya and Micciché, the basis for removal is widely believed to be alleged mismanagement in their dioceses, including accusations of financial corruption. Morris, meanwhile, was charged with doctrinal deviations, including support for women priests.

Not long ago, Bezák was seen as an up-and-coming figure on the European Catholic scene. Earlier this year, however, it became clear that Rome had serious concerns.

In January, the Vatican named Czech Bishop Jan Baxant of the Litomerice as an apostolic visitor to Trnava. That review triggered rumors of a possible change in leadership, since Baxant apparently asked other bishops in Slovakia how they would react if Bezák were removed.

According to Slovakian journalist Andrej Matisak, Bezák has spoken only briefly about his situation, during a Sunday Mass the day before the Vatican announced his removal. Reportedly, Bezák said that he had been instructed not to speak to the media, that he had been given no reason for his dismissal, and that he was supposed to leave Trnava.

Matisak said it?s believed Bezák had been asked to resign voluntarily and had refused.

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