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Governance a top issue in 2013 conclave

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 11, 2013
Conclave 2013
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Eight years ago, when the cardinals of the world gathered to elect a successor to Pope John Paul II, their watchword was ?continuity.? Buoyed by the massive outpouring of grief and affection for the late pope that washed through the streets of Rome, they felt they had just witnessed the end of a massively successful pontificate, and they wanted to keep the momentum going.

The man who was the intellectual architect of John Paul?s papacy, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, therefore seemed an obvious choice.

This time around, there?s another voting issue that seems equally front and center, although it may not lead quite as directly to a specific candidate. In a word, the driving issue this time appears to be ?governance.?

Time and again, both publicly and privately, cardinals have said that whatever other qualities the next pope may possess, he has to be someone who can remedy the perceived breakdowns in business management in the Vatican over the last eight years.

Those meltdowns include a global firestorm over lifting the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop in 2009, perceived mishandling of the explosion of the child sexual abuse crisis in Europe in 2010, and the Vatican leaks crisis last year.

Just a day after Pope Benedict XVI?s Feb. 11 resignation announcement, Cardinal Joachim Meisner of Cologne, Germany, gave an interview in which he said that in 2009 he went to see the pope to ask him, in the name of several cardinals, to fire his secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone.

Benedict, Meisner said, didn?t want to hear it.

?It?s typical: The Ratzingers are loyal, and that doesn?t always make their lives easy,? he said.

Cardinal George Pell of Sydney was even blunter before he left home to head for the conclave.

?I think the governance is done by most of the people around the pope, and that wasn?t always done brilliantly,? he said. ?I?m not breaking any ground there ? this is said very commonly.?

Though the Australian media initially spun Pell?s remarks as surprising criticism of Benedict, it quickly became clear that he was on the money in terms of how widespread those sentiments are.

?The central government [of the church] isn?t working as well as it should be,? Cardinal Francis George of Chicago said in an interview with *NCR*.

?Obviously something?s not working if the personal papers of the pope can be purloined from his desk and be printed in the media, including papers we?ve sent,? George said.

Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston made much the same point in his interview with *NCR*.

?The church?s house has to be in pretty good order to make sure that your message is being heard, and that you?re not stumbling,? DiNardo said. ?We?ve had some distractions lately, and we don?t need all those distractions.?

When that many cardinals are singing from the same hymnal, it suggests a strong ?good governance? push heading into the election of the next pope.

In part, that may suggest the cardinals feel invested not only in who the pope will be, but also the kind of figures he might name to top managerial positions ? beginning with the secretary of state, the position that?s supposed to act as a sort of ?prime minister? in the Vatican.

On the other hand, the sense that making the trains run on time in the Vatican ought to be a top concern was not 100 percent universal.

?There are those who consider the running of the Roman Curia very important, but I?m more interested in how we?re able to project the message of Jesus to our people,? Cardinal John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, told *NCR*.

?The Curia,? he said, ?is just a small little minority of the whole church of God.?

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