

Cardinals Will Not Be Rushed Into Electing New Pope

Catholic cardinals said on Tuesday they wanted time to get to know each other before choosing the next pope and meanwhile would seek more information on a secret report on alleged corruption in the Vatican.

Nearly 150 cardinals held a second day of preliminary meetings, known as "general congregations," to sketch a profile for the next pope following the shock abdication of Pope Benedict last month.

Under Church law they have until March 20 to start a conclave to choose a new pope from among 115 of them who are under the age of 80, but they can decide to start it earlier.

While many observers had expected the conclave to begin as early as this Sunday, there have been increasing indications that the cardinals may need more time to ponder who among them might be best to lead a church beset by crises.

"Many cardinals are concerned that if there is not enough time spent in the general congregations that once we get into the conclave it could drag on," Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley said.

"I think the preference would be to have enough discussions previous that when people go to the conclave they already have a sort of pretty good idea of who they are going to vote for at that point," he told a news conference.

The preliminary meetings are taking place as the crisis involving sexual abuse of children by priests and inappropriate behavior among adult clerics continues to haunt the church and has rarely been out of the headlines.

One elector—Cardinal Keith O'Brien—quit as Edinburgh archbishop last week and pulled out of attending the conclave

because of accusations that he behaved inappropriately with priests and seminarians in the past.

He at first denied the allegations but on Sunday issued a statement apologizing that "my sexual conduct has fallen below the standards expected of me as a priest, archbishop and cardinal".

Cardinals will be using the daily preliminary meetings, which began on Monday, to get to know each other and decide when to start the closed-door conclave to choose a man to lead the 1.2 billion-member Church at one of most difficult periods in its history.

"This is the most important decision that some of us will ever make and we need to give it the time that's necessary," O'Malley said.

Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, said: "It takes as long as it takes ... no one wants to rush this if it can't be rushed."

The prelates, however, have said that if at all possible they would like to be home for Palm Sunday, which falls on March 24, meaning that a new pope would have to be elected and installed at a separate ceremony before then.

Sistine Chapel Closed

There was no indication when the cardinals would decide on the starting date of the conclave.

The Sistine Chapel, where it will be held, was closed to the public on Tuesday to allow workmen to prepare the Michelangelo-frescoed room for the gathering, disappointing many tourists who had come to Rome to see it.

For the second consecutive day at the closed-door preliminary meetings the cardinals discussed the Vatican's often dysfunctional central administration, known as the curia, and

a secret report on last year's so-called "Vatileaks" scandal.

The leaks scandal led to the arrest of Paolo Gabriele, the pope's butler, who was convicted of stealing personal papal documents and leaking them to the media. The documents alleged corruption and infighting over the running of its bank.

Benedict, who later pardoned Gabriele, decided to make the report available only to his successor but three elderly cardinals who wrote it are attending the preliminary meetings and are expected to brief their brother cardinals.

"We want to know and learn as much as we can relative to governance in the Church," said DiNardo.

Vatican officials have said the report's authors could "use their discernment" to give any necessary guidance to fellow cardinals without violating their pact of secrecy about its specific contents.

"I think the cardinals feel confident that we will get all the information that we need for our deliberations. It doesn't necessarily mean that the report will be shared with us but if there is anything germane that we need to know about I am sure that will be given," O'Malley said.

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