

Conclave Start Seen Delayed as Vatican Muzzles Cardinals

Vatican officials on Wednesday told cardinals gathered for the election of the next **pope** to stop speaking to the media, as further indications emerged that a **conclave** would not start early next week as had been expected.

American cardinals, who had been scheduled to hold their third media briefing in as many days, canceled it less than an hour before it was to have started at Rome's North American College, where they are residing.

A spokeswoman for the American cardinals said "concern" was expressed at Wednesday's closed-door meeting "about leaks of confidential proceedings reported in Italian newspapers."

More than 150 **cardinals** attended the third day of the preliminary meetings to sketch a profile for the next pope, following the shock abdication of Pope Benedict last month. All but two of the 115 "cardinal electors" aged under 80 have arrived for the meetings, the Vatican said.

In their briefings, the American cardinals did not disclose specifics but spoke generally about the proceedings as well as of their hopes and concerns about the state of the **Catholic Church** at a crucial time in its history.

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.

Asked about the cancellation of the U.S. briefing, Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi said the pre-conclave meetings, known as general congregations, had to take place in a "climate of confidentiality."

Lombardi said the preparation by the cardinals towards the conclave “is a path in which the college of cardinals reflects in order to reach a decision, in conscience, of each of the members for the election of the Roman Pontiff.”

Cardinals from other countries have also been speaking to the media informally on the streets near the Vatican, but the Americans were the only group holding daily formal briefings.

Sistine Chapel

The cancellation of the briefing means the only official source of information would come from a daily briefing by the Vatican spokesman.

The spokeswoman for the Americans said: “As a precaution, the (U.S.) cardinals have agreed not to do interviews.”

Under church law, the cardinals have until March 20 to start a conclave to choose a new pope to lead the 1.2 billion-member church.

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

Several of the prelates leaving the meetings said preliminary proceedings were still at the early stages and more time would be necessary before they could decide on when to start the conclave in the Sistine Chapel.

Workmen have begun preparing the chapel, building a new, suspended floor to protect the centuries-old tiles.

Nonetheless, the Vatican spokesman said it was important that no one felt “pressured” into going into the conclave before they were ready and that more time would be needed for “reflection.”

One cardinal leaving the meeting said there had been no formal

discussion on Wednesday of the so-called “Vatileaks” scandal, which led to the arrest of Paolo Gabriele, the pope’s butler, further besmirching the church’s reputation.

Gabriele 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.

A trio of elderly cardinals prepared a report on the scandal for Benedict, who later pardoned Gabriele, and a number of cardinals attending the preliminary meetings said they wanted to be briefed on the report.

Editing by Alison Williams.

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