

Women Deserve Bigger Role in Church, Says Key Cardinal

The Roman Catholic Church must open itself up to women in the next pontificate, giving them more leadership positions in the Vatican and beyond, according to a senior cardinal who will be influential in electing the next pope.

In an exclusive interview with Reuters, Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, 69, an Argentine, also said the next pope should not be chosen according to a geographic area but must be a "saintly man" qualified to lead the Church in a time of crisis.

He said one of the greatest challenges facing the Church was trying to win back those suffering from a "loss of faith" who had "turned their back on God" and the Church of their fathers.

Sandri, an experienced diplomat and past number two in the Vatican bureaucracy, is expected to wield great influence in the choice of the man to succeed Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.

"The role of women in the world has increased and this is something the Church has to ask itself about," Sandri said in his office just outside St Peter's Square where he heads the Vatican department for Eastern Catholic Churches.

"They must have a much more important role in the life of the Church ... so that they can contribute to Church life in so many areas which are now, in part, open only to men ... This will be a challenge for us in the future."

At present women, most of them nuns, can only reach the position of under-secretary in Vatican departments, the number three post after president and secretary, which so far have been held by ordained men. Currently only two women are under-

secretaries, one a nun and one a lay woman.

Sandri, a son of Italian immigrants who has been mentioned as a papal candidate, said it was “only right” that women should have more key positions in the Vatican administration “where they can make a very important contribution because of their qualifications”.

He added: “But they must also be co-participants in the dialogue and the analysis of the life of the Church and in (other) areas, even in the formation of priests, where they can play a very, very important role.”

No Change to Ban on Women Priests Foreseen

The Church teaches that women cannot become priests because Jesus willingly chose only men as his apostles. Sandri gave no indication that the rule could be changed.

Sandri spoke as cardinals from around the world gathered for preliminary meetings on Monday ahead of a closed-door conclave to choose a new pope which is expected to begin in the Sistine Chapel around March 10.

He said the next pope should have holiness, physical strength, communications skills, and the ability to govern.

“The problem is finding the four qualities together. Sometimes someone has an excess of one quality and less of others ... for me, the most important thing is that he be a man of faith who is not afraid,” the cardinal said.

“I would like to see the new pope be someone who above all is, if not yet a saint – that is difficult to ask for – someone who is at least walking towards sanctity through a life of humility, work, prayer and witness to the Gospel,” he said.

Papal Qualities

He listed the qualities a pope should have as:

- “A pope who has a certain vigor, a physical resistance,

a capacity to carry out all the commitments of the papacy.”

- “A great ability to communicate, a gift to be able to express to others that the pope is a representative of God and the vicar of Christ but is also a human being who smiles, who shakes hands, who embraces people, who reaches out to people and is close to all those to approach him.”
- “He should also be one who knows how to govern, not only from personal experience but who will also surround himself with people who can help him do this.”

Parts of the Vatican’s central administration, known as the Curia, have been faulted for not preventing some of the scandals and mishaps that marked Benedict’s troubled papacy.

There has been much speculation that the next pope could be a non-European, perhaps from Africa or Asia, both places where the Church is more vibrant and less ossified than in Europe and in other developed areas.

But Sandri warned against picking a pope by his passport.

“I am skeptical about relying on geographical definitions. Someone should not be elected pope just because he is not a European,” the cardinal said.

“We have to choose the best person, the one who has all the personal qualities of health, vigor, preparation and experience, without regard to geographical origin,” he said.

Cardinal Peter Turkson, 64, from Ghana, who heads the Vatican’s justice and peace department, is seen as a leading African candidate.

“The Church is ready for a black pope but maybe the world is not,” Sandri said. “We are open to anyone as long he is the best prepared, the best qualified, to face a time that is so difficult for the Church and the world.”