

News Release

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IU Kokomo Chancellor’s Scholar gives inside view on the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, election of the next leader of the Catholic church

KOKOMO, Ind. — The Catholic Church is at a crossroads, as it prepares to select its next leader.

Pope Benedict XVI stepped down on February 28, the first pope in nearly 600 years to resign the office. Rev. Bernard O’Connor, Indiana University Kokomo’s Chancellor’s Scholar for Law and Humanities, spoke about the implications of the resignation, and what is next for the church, at a recent Arts and Sciences Research Forum.

“I think we’re on the cusp of a remarkable reformation, if we get the right candidate,” O’Connor said.

He has a unique view of what may happen, as he worked in Rome and the Vatican prior to teaching at IU Kokomo. He served as Benedict XVI’s representative to the approximately 5 million Catholics in India, and met the church leader at least twice a year during that time.

He anticipates the College of Cardinals will meet in the papal conclave to elect the next pope around March 10, and will make their choice quickly.

What remains to be seen is which direction the conclave goes with its selection — if it chooses a traditional candidate, likely from Italy, or if it signals reform by choosing a pope from Africa, Asia, or South America.

O’Connor’s choice is the Archbishop of Caracas, Venezuela, Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino.

“If that is where your main population lies, the time has come,” he said, noting that 41 percent of the world’s Catholics live in South America. “I hope and pray I see a pope from South America or Africa.”

O’Connor said Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York, is the most likely American candidate. He personally favors Cardinal Sean O’Malley, Archbishop of Boston, but doesn’t think the church is ready for an American pope.

“As a compromise, they may choose a Canadian,” he said, most likely Cardinal Marc Ouellet, the prefect of the Congregation of Bishops.

He cited the selection of John Paul II as an example of a radical choice. He succeeded John Paul I, who died after only 33 days in office. O’Connor said the cardinals had time to go home and hear from their constituents between that election, and see that they were ready for a non-traditional choice.

John Paul II, from Poland, was the first non-Italian pope in more than 500 years.

He hopes the conclave doesn’t just look for someone with administrative skills.

“The church does not need a brilliant administrator, it needs a humble pastor,” he said. “It needs someone who is comfortable in dialogue with unbelievers, those who have faith crises. Those are the people we need to address. Will they get the message, or will they be so disoriented by the resignation that they make a safe choice?”

O’Connor said Benedict’s resignation should not have come as a surprise, as the former pope made no secret of the fact he planned to step down if his health declined and he could no longer perform the job, physically or mentally.

The pope’s work day begins at 6 a.m., and does not end until 8 p.m., a grueling schedule for a man far younger than Benedict’s 85 years, O’Connor said.

“It’s non stop,” he said. “It is brutal. I’m surprised he held out as long as he did.”

O’Connor added that Benedict XVI spoke with his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, in the last years of his life, when he struggled with Parkinson’s disease and other ailments. Benedict, who was then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, advised the Pope that if he were in his place, he would resign.

O’Connor said while some have questioned if there is more background to the resignation, “What brought him down was old age. The fact of the matter is, for quite some time, he’s needed a push cart to get down the aisle for Mass.”

Based on comments by the pope's brother, George Ratzinger, that Benedict XVI will end his prolific writing after retirement, O'Connor believes Benedict may have Alzheimer's disease.

"All of a sudden he's going to put down the pen?" O'Connor said. "I'm reading between the lines. Benedict had the courage and the humility to say, 'What I told you I will do, I will do.'"

He said Benedict has paved the way for reform, and for a possible reunification with the Protestant church, by removing many of the monarchical trappings of the office of pope, making it more accessible. He hopes the next leader will continue the trend of reform, and also will seek new forms of evangelism.

Indiana University Kokomo serves north central Indiana.

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