Catholic Church in Brazil Prepared for Changes with Election of New Pope

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by José Pedro Martins

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With the largest number of Catholics in the world, Brazil is watching especially closely the process to replace Pope Benedict XVI, who is now pope emeritus but will retain the name Benedict XVI. Expectations center not so much on whether the new pope will be from Europe or from another continent but rather on the changes that the new head of the Catholic Church will carry out at a time when the church is being hit with various serious accusations, including corruption and covering up cases of pedophilia.

Brazil will have a direct presence at the conclave through the five Brazilian cardinals who will participate in the election. One of them is Raymundo Cardinal Damasceno Assis, president of the Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB). Several times, he emphasized that Benedict's resignation was "a prophetic gesture." Another Brazilian choosing the new pope is João Cardinal Braz de Aviz, considered one of the "papibles," or leading candidates, if the pope is chosen from somewhere other than Europe.

Brazil will also be remembered in the papal election because the secretary of the conclave that will choose Benedict XVI's successor will be Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri. He was the apostolic nuncio, the Vatican's ambassador, in Brazil between 2002 and 2012, during the entire time that Benedict was the supreme pontiff.

Opinions on the pope's resignation were varied, as is the Catholic Church in Brazil, which is characterized by its diversity of ideas and discourse.

"With the challenges at the beginning of this new millennium, in a world in transition, a new era, we must evaluate the specific conditions of those challenges and have the courage to make decisions. We would like it if, in all areas of the churches and the nations, in such cases, the example [of Benedict] were followed," said a communiqué from the Conselho Nacional do Laicato do Brasil (CNLB), "We thank God for this Christian bishop of Rome, our beloved Pope Benedict XVI, for his rich teaching, his apostolic zeal, his prophetic courage. With the prophet Jeremiah, we ask God to give us a "pastor according to his heart," to help us move forward on the path of Vatican Council II, which builds unity and communion."

Church must become more relevant

Fr. José Antonio Trasferetti, the former two-term president of the Sociedade Brasileira de Teologia Moral (SBTM), considers that Benedict's resignation was an act "of humility, of courage," but also a confession that "he has failed in leading the church in the face of the large problems that affect today's world and the institution."

Citing specifically the accusations of corruption, covering up pedophilia, and others, Fr. Trasferetti said, "The problems were emerging and Benedict was a little timid, after being disappointed by
the people whom he named precisely to help resolve the crisis." The Brazilian priest noted that Benedict spoke specifically of "hypocrisy" in his farewell address.

Trasferetti said Benedicti XVI's gesture was a sign that the church "must re-examine the question of the ideal age of a pope, because in a fast-moving world such as ours, where a pope has to travel a lot, receive people, read reports, etc., his health is important."

In that regard, the new pope should be younger and a good administrator to immediately tackle the most important matters, such as the allegations of corruption and the issues surrounding pedophilia. "The church has to respond to that issue with more firmness," emphasized the ex-president of the SBTM.

But, the church must also confront other moral questions, says Fr. Trasferetti. "Brazil and other developing countries talk a lot about poverty, violence, and corruption, given their reality, but in Europe more advanced discussions are taking place on other moral issues, including celibacy, women's role in the church, and the use of contraceptives," he said.

In any event, Fr. Trasferetti believes that the new pope must maintain a Eurocentric position in relation to the church in Brazil and other countries. The transition toward greater decentralization, therefore, must wait. The priest believes that the new pope could set off a process to build a Vatican III. "The world is changing very rapidly, and new technologies accelerate things. It would be healthy for the church to have a better discussion about its situation in the world," he said.

The Brazilian church is also especially attentive to the election of the new pope because of an important event that will take place in the country. On July 23-28, Rio de Janeiro will host the XXVIII World Youth Day, under the theme, "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Mt 28:19)

World Youth Day is considered strategic for the church's process of renewal, and Pope Benedict XVI's presence at the event was taken as a given. Now, the question is whether the new pope will attend the event, which will attract more than 2 million young people from around the world. The message that the new pope will give these young people, by his presence in Rio or lack thereof, will be considered a sign of what the papacy will be in the coming years, in this turbulent and complex 21st century.

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