

Hit By Scandal, A Cardinal Falls – And Bails On Conclave



Following allegations of "inappropriate behavior" – sexual advances reported by several men – dating to both his time as a seminary rector and archbishop of Scotland's capital through the 1980s, Great Britain's lone cardinal-electoral has resigned less than a month before reaching the retirement age of 75.

At Roman Noon, Pope Benedict yanked Cardinal Keith O'Brien as archbishop of St Andrew's and Edinburgh three days before the pontiff's own departure from office is to take effect.

After three priests and a former cleric lodged allegations against Scotland's longtime top prelate a week before Benedict's resignation, the story broke into public view late Saturday with a piece in the London-based Observer, a liberal paper.

According to early reports, O'Brien – who scored earlier headlines over the weekend with comments favoring optional celibacy for priests – will not participate in the Conclave.

Should O'Brien not attend, Great Britain would lack a representative in a papal election for the first time since 1963, when England's primatial see at Westminster was vacant. Only six years later did Scotland receive its first resident cardinal since the Reformation – O'Brien's predecessor, Cardinal Norman Gray. Since then, the home of the North's single red hat has alternated between the archdioceses of Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Born in Northern Ireland, the now-cardinal oversaw a minor seminary at the time of the first of the reported incidents, leaving that post on his 1985 appointment as head of Edinburgh's 115,000-member church.

Long viewed as an outspoken progressive, O'Brien was unusually ordered to make a public Profession of Faith by the Vatican before his 2003 elevation to the College, while already a cardinal-designate. In recent years, however, the cardinal has become a leading voice against the growing British movement

toward same-sex marriage.

Following late last week's announcement that the Indonesian Cardinal Julius Riyadi Darmaatmadja SJ is unable to travel to Rome due to failing eyesight, with the Scot's absence the number of electors in the coming process would fall to 115.

While cardinals are normally mandated to come to Rome to participate in the election unless prevented for exceptional cases of ill health, it appears that no attempt will be made to force a reversal of O'Brien's recusal from the process.

The sudden storm over the Scots prelate has coincided with a heated round of controversy in the Italian press over the presence of Cardinal Roger Mahony at the Conclave following the recent release of documents implicating a cover-up of sex-abuse by the retired LA prelate.

Set to turn 77 on Wednesday, Mahony doesn't just remain an elector but, by seniority in the College, will lead the 11-member US delegation in the Sistine Chapel – the Conclave's second-largest bloc after the 28 votes from Italy.

Shortly before the cardinal sat for a weekend deposition in an abuse case, a statement released from the US' largest diocese said that Mahony "will travel to Rome to fulfill his sacred duty under church law to vote for the next Pope."

Judging by the latest post on his blog – datelined "Vatican City" – it seems he's already arrived.

Latest: At a Vatican briefing, the papal spokesman, Fr Federico Lombardi, said that O'Brien's resignation was accepted by Pope Benedict a week ago, on 18 February.

The Holy See declined further comment.

In his own statement, meanwhile, O'Brien confirmed that "I will not be joining" the other cardinals for the Conclave.

"I do not wish media attention in Rome to be focused on me — but rather on Pope Benedict XVI and on his Successor," the cardinal said.

"However, I will pray with them and for them that, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, they will make the correct choice for the future good of the church."

Without mentioning the allegations, O'Brien said that "Looking back over my years of ministry: For any good I have been able to do, I thank God. For any failures, I apologise to all whom I have offended."

An apostolic administrator will be named to temporarily govern the Edinburgh church until the cardinal's successor is named by the next Pope.

Rocco Palmo - Whispers in the loggia