

VATICAN CAOS

Rey, McElroy, Brambilla: the Pope's fireworks for 2025

ECCLESIA

08_01_2025



**Nico
Spuntoni**



The year 2025 begins with the retirement of another bishop with traditional sensibilities. As of yesterday, Monsignor Dominique Rey no longer heads the diocese of Fréjus-Toulon. Francis had already placed him under receivership in November 2023 with the

appointment of a coadjutor, Monsignor François Touvet. And it was Touvet who was appointed to succeed Rey, who retired after 25 years at the age of 72.

The ordeal of the diocese of Fréjus-Toulon began in 2022 with a first visit by the current Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline, Metropolitan Archbishop of Marseille, and continued with the suspension of diaconal and priestly ordinations ordered by Rome. At a time when the decline in vocations has become the norm almost everywhere, Fréjus-Tolone was an exception, thanks to the welcoming policy of Monsignor Rey towards traditional and charismatic communities. It seems paradoxical, but full seminaries drew the attention of the Holy See to the south-east of France. In 2023 it was the turn of the apostolic visit led by Monsignor Antoine Hérouard, Metropolitan Archbishop of Dijon, assisted by Joël Mercier, former Secretary of the Dicastery for the Clergy. Then, at the end of the year, the appointment of Touvet as coadjutor bishop.

Now comes the final act with Rey's resignation, induced by Rome. The French bishop has indeed decided to leave, but he has made public the background to this epilogue. The Monsignor wrote in the statement announcing his resignation: Immediately after this appointment (of Touvet as coadjutor, ed), during a private audience on 23 December 2023, the Pope encouraged me to accept this collaboration in a fraternal spirit and not to resign. At the end of a first year in which the suspension of ordinations was lifted for almost all the candidates, the Nuncio informed me that the Holy Father was asking me to resign as Diocesan Bishop of Fréjus-Tolone, without me being aware of any new elements other than those that had motivated the appointment of coadjutor Bishop.

A procedure that has been repeated in other cases, but only in private by the bishops involved, with personal encouragement not to return to a post and then the request for resignation sent by the Nuncio. Monsignor Rey, however, decided not to hide what really happened, explaining that "in the face of misunderstandings, pressures and controversies, which are always harmful to the unity of the Church", he decided to adopt the criterion of "obedience to the Successor of Peter". Moreover, Rey had the opportunity to meet and speak with the Pope on 30 November last year, when he accompanied a delegation of French parliamentarians on a pilgrimage to Rome. The communiqué makes no mention of this audience, during which Francis apparently did not mention his decision to ask for his resignation. A decision that was probably communicated to him by Nuncio Celestino Migliore a few days after his return from Rome.

The prelate leaves amid the regret and gratitude of the faithful and the many

religious ordained during his tenure. And now many fear that the same fate will befall Monsignor Marc Aillet, Bishop of the diocese of Bayonne, who has already received a fraternal visit in recent months.

If times are grey for bishops with a more conservative ecclesial sensibility, the same cannot be said for those fighting in favour of the female diaconate and the 'radical inclusion' of the LGBT world in the Catholic Church. In fact, Francis has 'promoted' Cardinal Robert W. McElroy, a strong promoter of these issues, from San Diego to Washington. He takes the place of Cardinal Wilton Daniel Gregory, just as the hated Donald Trump takes office in the White House. In the former diocese of Theodore Edgar McCarrick, a bishop arrives who had been warned in 2016 about the predatory behaviour of the former cardinal abuser. After some meetings, the now deceased psychotherapist Richard Sipe had a letter delivered to McElroy detailing McCarrick's accounts of sexual abuse, but the new archbishop of Washington refused to receive it.

Rey's resignation and McElroy's 'promotion' are not the only news destined to cause a stir in the Church. On the feast of the Epiphany, Francis decided to appoint the first woman to head a department of the Holy See. Sister Simona Brambilla, a psychologist, is the new Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. It is an attention-grabbing appointment that, not by chance, has delighted the media, who are ready to laugh at the umpteenth "first" of the Pope and even to use the term "prefect". But it is no detail that Francis has placed a cardinal alongside Sister Brambilla, the Salesian Ángel Fernández Artime. Already 'predestined' to lead the dicastery left by Cardinal João Braz de Aviz after fourteen years, Artime has been appointed pro-prefect. And now many are wondering what the point of a pro-prefect is in the presence of a prefect. Or vice versa.

What is certain is that Francis has contradicted himself with this appointment: on 21 June 2015, speaking to the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, the Pope had branded the appointment of a woman as head of the dicastery as "functionalism". Curiously, this passage does not appear on the Holy See's website, which only publishes the speech prepared for the occasion, but which the Pope did not deliver, preferring to speak extemporaneously.