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Waiting game: New Vatican agency yet to materialize

John Thavis Catholic News Service | Sep. 24, 2010

Archbishop Rino Fisichella, head of the Pontifical Academy for Life, at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome June 28.

VATICAN CITY -- In June, Pope Benedict XVI announced he was establishing a major Vatican agency to deal with "new evangelization" in traditionally Christian countries.

The pope's initiative was seen as a bold stroke in the church's ongoing effort to engage the modern world. But three months later, the project is still stuck in the slow wheels of Vatican bureaucracy.

Officially, in fact, the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization doesn't yet exist. Although the pope proclaimed its formation and then named its president, Italian Archbishop Rino Fisichella, the office will formally be launched only with publication an apostolic constitution, in which the pope will lay out the council's structure and tasks.

In the meantime, Archbishop Fisichella is in a kind of limbo.

"We're hoping it will come around the end of September. I don't know any more than that. We need to be patient with the bureaucracy here," he said.

The pope keeps mentioning the importance of the new council. Most recently, he urged British bishops to "avail yourselves of its services."

But the council has no address, no phone number and no official mission. Work is proceeding on the council's office -- after the construction team took a month off for the traditional August holidays.

As Archbishop Fisichella said, "Pazienza." And at the Vatican, patience is more than a virtue; it's a way of life.

The refusal to be rushed can be seen in long-delayed appointments, the slow gestation of documents and the methodical preparation of events such as synods or consistories.

To take just one example, the pope's document on the 2008 Synod of Bishops on the Bible -- described as an

urgently needed text by the synod participants -- was expected late last year or early in 2010. It has been inexplicably deferred and is now due out in the fall.

The timeline for that synod began with planning in 2006, making it a four-year run.

The pope can sometimes accelerate things, but even he is subject to the deliberate pace of the Roman Curia. A case in point: The pope finished his long-awaited second volume on Jesus of Nazareth last May, promoting speculation that the book would be released soon.

But Vatican officials are being so careful in their translations of the book that it's not coming out until Lent of 2011. By that time, the pope may have a good start on the third and final volume of the series, which he began writing over the summer.

When it comes to appointments, the Vatican can move with lightning speed or slow motion. U.S. Archbishop-designate Joseph W. Tobin was recently appointed secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, a position that had been unfilled for six months. That's a long vacancy for the secretary job, which handles much of the day-to-day business of a congregation that oversees the world's men and women religious orders.

On the other hand, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications was without a No. 2 official for nearly three years before Irish Msgr. Paul Tighe was named secretary in 2008.

The College of Cardinals is one of the church's most important bodies, most significantly when it meets in a conclave to elect a new pope. Yet despite predictions to the contrary, Pope Benedict has shown no sense of urgency in filling vacancies among the 120 voting-age cardinals.

Rumors of a consistory to create new cardinals began more than a year ago, and it's now expected to happen in November, when the number of cardinal electors will have dipped to 101, the lowest in many years.

If the Vatican takes its time following up on events and personnel vacancies, it also anticipates some affairs by months or years. The Pontifical Council for the Family this week released the pope's letter for the Seventh World Meeting of Families -- which will be held in June 2012.

Similar messages for annual days devoted to mission, communications and young people are also released well ahead of time. The idea is that the advance release allows for wider dissemination of the papal text. On the other hand, by the time the events occur, such messages are rarely "breaking news."

One of the longest waits for a Vatican project was Pope John Paul II's 1989 reform of the Roman Curia, which took 16 years to put together -- more than half of his pontificate. When it was finally announced, it took several additional months to implement the changes and launch the newly created curia offices.

But what's a few months to an institution that thinks in centuries?

Pope Benedict seems to be just fine with the go-slow mentality that reigns in the Vatican, an attitude that reflects his general approach to workplace speed and efficiency. In 2006, citing the medieval monk St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the pope warned against "the dangers of excessive activity" in every kind of occupation, "even those involving the governance of the church."

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