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Pope Francis to name his first cardinals in February

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NCR Today

Pope Francis will name new cardinals in February, the Vatican press office confirmed Thursday, giving him a chance to begin influencing who will be selected as his successor one day.

Cardinals, sometimes known as the "princes of the church" and for their wearing of red vestments, are usually senior Catholic prelates who serve either as archbishops in the world's largest dioceses or in the Vatican's central bureaucracy.

After a pope's death or renunciation of the papal office, cardinals are also responsible for governing the church until they meet together in a secret conclave to elect the next pontiff.

Announcement of Francis' decision to name new members of the group will likely raise speculation of whether the new pontiff will follow past norms for who is usually appointed as a cardinal.

While the Vatican on Thursday confirmed the date for the formal ceremony at which the cardinals will be named, called a consistory, it did not say who Francis had chosen for the honor.

Several Vatican prelates occupy offices normally held by cardinals but are yet to receive the honor, including the new secretary of state, Archbishop Pietro Parolin, and the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Archbishop Gerhard Müller.

Choice of who becomes cardinal is at the pope's exclusive prerogative.

The consistory is to be held Feb. 22, the day Catholics celebrate the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter. A yearly liturgical event, the feast celebrates the unity of the billion-member church around the pope, who is said to be the successor of St. Peter.

Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi said in a statement that Francis intends for the consistory to come after an as-yet-unscheduled meeting of the current group of cardinals. The group of eight cardinals advising the pope on how to reform the governance of the church will also meet Feb. 17-18, Lombardi said.

The spokesman said the pope decided to announce the date of the consistory now "in order to facilitate the planning of other meetings involving the participation of cardinals from different parts of the world."

There are currently 109 cardinals under the age of 80, the age at which they become unable to vote in the election of the next pope. That number will fall to 106 by February, as three current cardinals are due to turn 80 by then.

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Pope Paul VI set a limit on the number of voting cardinals at 120, but popes, particularly John Paul II, have in the past waived that limit.

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