NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Francis gets down to business on reform

John L. Allen Jr. Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 25, 2013
Rome

Pope Francis recently described reform in the church as a two-step process. First, he said, one has to get the "attitudes" right, then policies and structures will follow.

If much of his first eight months in office has been about projecting new attitudes, Oct. 1-3 may be remembered as the moment when stage two kicked in and the pope got down to business.

Over those days, Francis joined the first meeting of his new Council of Cardinals, a body of eight prelates from around the world intended to bring the voices of local churches into decisions made in Rome.

One first fruit seemed clear even before the eight cardinals left town. On Oct. 8, the Vatican announced that Francis will convene an extraordinary Synod of Bishops Oct. 5-19, 2014, dedicated to the theme of the family -- officially, the "pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization."

The decision came in part out of the cardinals' meeting, and signals a step toward change on two levels.

Substantively, the synod is expected to take up the vexed question of Communion for divorced and civilly remarried Catholics who have not obtained an annulment. Francis said in July that he's open to greater generosity, perhaps along the lines of the Orthodox tradition of permitting a second marriage under certain circumstances.

On Oct. 14, Francis tapped Cardinal Péter Erd? of Hungary, president of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences, as the relator (chairman) for the synod, and Italian Archbishop Bruno Forte, known as one of the best theologians among the European bishops, as its special secretary.

In remarks to reporters, Forte confirmed the synod will discuss "wounded families, the divorced and remarried, [and] de facto couples."

Winds of change are perceived to be blowing so strongly that Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, felt compelled Oct. 8 to plead with local officials not to get ahead of the pope, asking them to wait for new policies to be adopted in Rome before implementing them on the ground.

(Without quite saying so, Lombardi's reference was to the Freiburg archdiocese in Germany, which recently issued a pastoral manual outlining criteria under which the divorced and remarried could receive the sacraments.)

Procedurally, sources also have made clear that the looming synod will not be business as usual.

The intention is to provide for more substantial consultation at the local level, in dioceses and parishes, even using the Internet to allow rank-and-file Catholics to offer ideas and reactions along the way. Plans also call for going back to the base after the synod is concluded, allowing people to comment on its results before they're

presented to the pope.

Those revisions also reflect discussions among the Council of Cardinals. The day before its meeting began, Francis demonstrated how seriously he takes the group by issuing a chirograph, or legal document, making it permanent and giving himself latitude to appoint other members.

On other fronts, sources say the council discussed the role of the secretary of state, by tradition considered the Vatican's prime minister, with a broad sense that it may be a mistake to concentrate too much responsibility for both foreign relations and internal church governance in one office.

The impression is that Francis wants his new secretary of state, Italian Archbishop Pietro Parolin, to concentrate largely on foreign affairs, while internal management is distributed more broadly to avoid a bottleneck. (The 58-year-old Parolin, who was to take office Oct. 19, is the youngest secretary of state since Eugenio Pacelli was appointed in 1930 at the age of 54. Pacelli went on to become Pope Pius XII.)

There was apparently interest in a new position to coordinate the work of the Vatican's departments, though probably not under the proposed title of "moderator of the Curia." In part, that's because it's a term used in dioceses for the senior official under the bishop, and the cardinals don't want to create a "vice-pope."

A perceived lack of coordination among Vatican offices is a long-standing source of frustration.

To take one example, Cardinal Walter Kasper, at the time the Vatican's top officer for ecumenical relations, said in 2000 that he wasn't consulted about release of a document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, then led by the future Pope Benedict XVI, that drew blowback from other Christian churches on the basis of perceived ecumenical slights.

NCR confirmed that two other matters also came up among the cardinals: the church's sex abuse scandals and the question of honorifics bestowed by the papacy.

Lombardi told reporters during a midday briefing Oct. 3 that there hadn't been any discussion of sex abuse, but sources told *NCR* it came up later that afternoon. In general, those sources said, Francis affirmed his commitment to a strong "zero tolerance" policy.

Prior to the council's meeting, Francis used a Sept. 30 consistory, called to ratify the April 27 canonization date for Popes John Paul II and John XXIII, to take the temperature of cardinals on the idea of creating national or regional tribunals for sex abuse cases. Experts see such tribunals as potentially helpful for regions of the world that lack expertise and resources.

Sources say, however, that project may not move forward quickly, in part because there's opposition in some quarters to the new rules adopted by Benedict under which these cases are handled -- including concerns about the due process rights of accused priests.

The Council of Cardinals also discussed honorifics, such as naming priests "honorary prelates" and thereby allowing them to use the title of "monsignor," with one cardinal describing such practices as "baubles" that could be set aside.

Finally, the cardinals also expressed a desire to see a stronger lay role inside the Vatican, including the possibility that certain administrative offices, such as the Government of the Vatican City State, don't need to be entrusted to clergy.

With regard to other ideas for reorganization, the Council of Cardinals plans to review the work of an eight-

member commission created by Francis in July to study the Vatican's economic and administrative structures. One cardinal told *NCR* on background that the commission, which is composed almost entirely of laity, is "working very well."

"Those of us who want to see real change," the cardinal said, "have reason to be optimistic."

The next meeting of the Council of Cardinals is set for Dec. 3-5 in Rome, with a subsequent session expected in early February.

[John L. Allen Jr. (**jallen@ncronline.org**) and Joshua J. McElwee (**jmcelwee@ncronline.org**) are *NCR* correspondents.]

The Next Step FORWARD [1]

DONATE NOW [1]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [1]

Source URL (retrieved on *08/01/2015 - 03:06*): http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-gets-down-business-reform

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end