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Vatican: Council of Cardinals undertaking 'in-depth' reform

Joshua J. McElwee | Dec. 3, 2013
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As the pope meets for the second time this week with eight cardinals he has appointed to help him reform the church's central bureaucracy, the Vatican said Tuesday the objective is not small changes but wide revisions.

The work of the group, known formally as the Council of Cardinals, "requires going in depth ... to really go in depth," said Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi at a press briefing.

"Their idea and their objective is not to make small changes ... but a consistent and in-depth revision" of the papal document, known as an apostolic constitution, which governs the functions of Vatican bureaucracy, Lombardi said.

"We can even speak about a new apostolic constitution for the Curia," he said.

The cardinals' group is meeting Tuesday through Thursday at the Vatican. The group, which includes prelates from six of the seven continents, met for the first time Oct. 1-3. The lone American in the group is Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley. Honduran Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga serves as its coordinator.

Pope Francis announced the formation of the consultative body in April, saying it was meant to "study a project of revision" of the Vatican's bureaucracy.

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"), released last week, Francis cited the Second Vatican Council's call for a "continual reformation" of the church "in so far as she is a human institution here on earth."

"What I am trying to express here has a programmatic significance and important consequences," he wrote in the document.

Though Francis didn't lay out a comprehensive blueprint for reform in *Evangelii Gaudium*, he presented some specific examples, such as calling for a "conversion of the papacy" and "a sound decentralization." He also suggested that bishops' conferences ought to be given "a juridical status ... including genuine doctrinal authority."

While the October meetings were held behind closed doors -- the cardinals reportedly agreed jointly to keep all discussions private -- knowledgeable sources told *NCR* afterward [1] that key considerations revolved around how to reform the Vatican bureaucracy to be more efficient, more representative of the world's population, and to more substantively include laypeople.

Lombardi said Tuesday the cardinals started their meeting this time around by "immediately" addressing the work of specific offices of the Vatican's bureaucracy, known as the Roman Curia.

The cardinals began by discussing the functions of the Vatican office that handles the liturgical practices of

Catholics around the world, known as the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Lombardi said.

The cardinals did not discuss the functions of that congregation for a specific reason but because they plan to evaluate each of the Vatican's offices "one by one," Lombardi said.

"You have to start from somewhere," the spokesman said. "They are just starting with one dicastery so we can carry on one by one with all of them."

As to what updates Catholics can expect on the progress of the cardinals' group in evaluating the Vatican's functions, both the spokesman and some of the cardinals have been unclear.

Rodríguez, the archbishop of the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa, put it this way in a November interview [2] with that the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*: "We'll see. Nothing's decided."

In that interview, the Honduran also said his group was considering how to merge several of the Vatican's offices and is considering also a new congregation for the laity.

While there is currently a Pontifical Council for the Laity, making such an office a congregation would give it a higher standing in the Vatican bureaucracy, making it equal to the offices like those responsible for enforcing church doctrine or selecting bishops around the world.

During the three days of the December gathering, the eight cardinals are staying in rooms at the Vatican's Santa Marta hotel, where the pope lives, and are meeting in a room near the hotel's chapel, Lombardi said Tuesday.

They are celebrating Mass each morning with the pope and are working for about three hours each morning and afternoon, Lombardi said.

The Vatican has said the third meeting of the group will come Feb. 17-18 in Rome followed by an as-yet-unscheduled meeting of the full body of the approximately 200 cardinals around the world.

On Tuesday, Lombardi said he expects the eight cardinals' group might give some sort of report on their work to the full body of cardinals then.

"I imagine that after a third meeting of the eight cardinals, it will be possible maybe to have certain elements ... that the pope might use or might present to the consistory and to the bishops at large," Lombardi said. "But I don't really think that there will be a conclusion that will be presented."

"It will take time, and we don't have to rush, especially when talking about the reflection which is so broad and so vast because of the different dicasteries that will be tackled," he said.

February will also see Pope Francis' first naming of new cardinals. He is to host a consistory -- a formal ceremony for the creation of new cardinals -- on Feb. 22, the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter.

As the pontiff has not yet said whom he has chosen to join the ranks of the group that votes for the next pope, it also seems possible he may call upon the eight cardinals' group this week for advice on whom to choose.

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