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Cardinals submit secret recommendations to Francis on church reform

Joshua J. McElwee | Feb. 19, 2014
Vatican City

The select group of eight cardinals advising Pope Francis on reforming the governance of the Catholic church have made a set of recommendations to the pontiff on how to restructure its central bureaucracy, especially financial operations, the Vatican announced Wednesday.

But the pope has yet to make any decisions on the matter and the recommendations will remain secret, said Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi.

The Council of Cardinals, Lombardi said during a briefing, "has worked intensely and drafted proposals and has taken ... them to the Holy Father."

"[The pope] will be the one deciding if those suggestions are to be taken and applied," the spokesman said.

The cardinals' group met Monday through Wednesday at the Vatican.

On Monday [1] and Tuesday [2], Lombardi said the eight cardinals had been studying especially the Vatican's troubled financial past, meeting with separate groups commissioned by the pope to study the Vatican's economic and administrative structures and the Institute for the Works of Religion, commonly known as the Vatican bank.

On Wednesday, Lombardi said the cardinals had submitted recommendations to Francis that dealt with two wide areas: the organization of the Vatican as a whole, especially its financial operations, and the bank.

The substance of the cardinals' recommendations will likely be the subject of much speculation in coming days as some 185 cardinals from around the world are converging on Rome for a meeting Thursday through Saturday to formally induct 19 new members into their ranks.

For his part, Lombardi on Tuesday declined to give further information about the eight cardinals' report, saying only that the length of the proposal was "maybe" two or three pages.

"It's not a book what they presented," he said. "It's not a little piece of paper. It's an in-between document."

The eight cardinals, Lombardi said, have also set dates for their next two meetings at the Vatican: April 28-30, following the formal ceremonies in Rome for the sainthood of Popes John XXIII and John Paul II; and July 1-4.

The publishing of the new meeting dates, the spokesman said, confirms that the group plans to keep working to discuss how to reform the governance structures of the church.

"They are going to keep on studying the different dicasteries ... which they didn't get to this meeting," he said.

Francis announced the new cardinals in January, picking prelates for the honor who mainly hail from the global South, including places like Haiti, Burkina Faso and the Philippines.

The full group of cardinals is to begin meeting Thursday morning, when they will hear a reflection on the issue of family life by Cardinal Walter Kasper, a German theologian and former head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Kasper's address to the full cardinals' group comes only a few weeks after the German bishops' conference released a blunt report showing a clear divergence [3] between what the church teaches on marriage, sexuality and family life and what German Catholics believe.

That report, which compiled official responses from all of Germany's 27 dioceses and about 20 German Catholic organizations and institutions, was undertaken in preparation for the October synod.

Lombardi said Wednesday there are no plans to publish Kasper's talk and the decision to make it public would be up to the cardinals. In past consistories, some things were published and some things weren't, he said.

"There is no real secrecy reason for not publishing them," said Lombardi, but it is up to the cardinals to decide.

The synod is to host meetings next week among its 15-member planning council to formally prepare for the October event.

Asked Wednesday if the head of the Vatican's office for the synod, Cardinal-designate Lorenzo Baldisseri, would make presentations at the consistory about the answers his office has collected from bishops in preparation for the October meeting, Lombardi said he did not think so.

"I doubt that he already has a presentation on the answers that he has collected," Lombardi said. "This is the objective of the following meeting [on Monday] which is specifically with the bishops' synod."

Lombardi was also asked Wednesday if Francis might invite his predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, to visit with the cardinals in Rome this week.

"I don't exclude that it would be possible, however, I can't imagine for Pope Benedict to come and attend some of the meetings," the spokesman responded. "I don't think that will happen."

Individual cardinals, however, could decide to go and greet Benedict, "but it really depends on their special desire," said Lombardi.

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