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Message for reform sent to pope, cardinals

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 19, 2013
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About 100 church reform groups from around the world have teamed together to circulate a petition asking Pope Francis to give Catholic lay faithful an "effective voice" in church decision-making.

The petition, styled as an open letter to the pope, is being mailed to the Vatican Friday in hopes it can impact Francis' Oct. 1-3 meeting with a group of eight cardinals he has appointed to advise him on the reforming of church structures.

"It is out of a deep concern for the Catholic Church, in the face of its many crises, that we, representing millions of Catholics from around the world, have collaborated in writing this letter," the writers begin [1].

"We are filled with hope that church governance will be discussed at your October meeting and we respectfully request that you give primary consideration to acknowledging the rights and responsibilities of the baptized to have a voice of influence in the decision-making of our Church."

Organizers of the petition told *NCR* Thursday they're sending copies directly to the pope, to each of the eight cardinals, and to the Vatican's apostolic nuncio, or ambassador, to the U.S.

A website dedicated to the effort lists the groups involved as coming from a dozen countries and representing a wide range of concerns about how the church functions.

"We are providing the unfiltered voice of the laity to the hierarchy, to the advisors and Pope Francis," said Janet Hauter, the chair of the U.S.-based group American Catholic Council, which is one of the signatories.

"We need to act swiftly so that commitments that might be made between Oct. 1 and Oct 3 are not set in stone before they hear what people are crying for," she said.

The pope called the October meeting last April, when the Vatican said he had created the group of eight cardinals to "advise him on the government of the universal church." Among the members of the group is Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley.

While it is unclear exactly what the cardinals and the pope will discuss during the three-day meeting -- or what reforms might eventually take root -- in an interview released Thursday by 16 Jesuit magazines globally, the pope said [2] he wants to "lay the foundations for real, effective change."

In their letter, the reform groups suggest five areas the pope and cardinals might consider in those changes:

- Focusing the church on a social justice mission that places "dignity and equality of every person at the heart of its lived mission;"
- Opening up avenues for dialogue and "freedom of reasoned inquiry" inside the church;
- Recognition of the equality of all people, including rejection of "the sexist exclusion of women from full

participation at all levels of the Church;"
- Inclusion of lay faithful in the choice of bishops;
- More effective measures to confront clergy sexual abuse globally.

Renee Reid, another of the organizers of the petition, said some in the group are planning to host a series of press conferences giving more details on the petition next week.

Among the larger organizations taking part in the petition campaign, named Catholic Church Reform, are: Call to Action in the U.S., We are Church in Germany; and the Australian Coalition for Catholic Church Renewal.

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