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Pope Francis, flanked by Vatican spokesman Alessandro Gisotti, answers reporters' questions aboard the plane after taking off from Panama City on Jan. 27. (AP/Pool/Alessandra Tarantino)



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Talking to reporters on his plane coming back from World Youth Day in Panama Jan. 27, Pope Francis downplayed what he called "inflated" expectations for the upcoming meeting of bishops in Rome to deal with clergy sexual abuse. "The expectations need to be deflated," he said. He also sought to lower expectations about the possibility of married priests.

Many in the United States have been hoping that the meeting on abuse, which will bring the presidents of the episcopal conferences from over 100 countries to the Vatican Feb. 21-24, would result in procedures for dealing with bishops who do not protect children from abusive priests. While the church has made progress in dealing with abusive priests, it still needs a process for dealing with bishops who do not protect children.

The expectations for the meeting were raised in November, when the head of the Vatican Congregation for Bishops, Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, told the American bishops not to vote on such procedures at their fall meeting in Baltimore. Ouellet said the Americans should wait for a discussion of the issue at the meeting in Rome.

It now appears that the meeting will not develop new policies but, in the words of Francis, will be a "catechesis" on the problem of abuse aimed at bishops who do not understand the issue or what they should do in response to abuse.

It also appears that the meeting will establish a task force to help bishops in implementing the church's policies and procedures for dealing with abuse.

"We noted that some bishops did not understand well, or did not know what to do," Francis told reporters during his news conference on the plane.

The pope hopes that the summit will help bishops understand the seriousness of abuse and what they must to do in response. The participants need to know "what the bishop must do, what the archbishop who is metropolitan must do, what the president of the bishops' conference must do," he said.

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The references to metropolitans (the archbishop who is first among equals in his geographical province) and presidents of bishops' conferences is confusing because they have no role in any sex abuse protocols at present. Each bishop is solely responsible for the priests in his diocese. The archbishops and presidents might provide moral leadership, but they do not have the authority to order a bishop to do anything. If at the meeting they are given new authority by the pope to deal with bad bishops, that would be something new.

The pope's comments confirm the point I made in an earlier column, that most Americans will view the meeting as a failure. The meeting is not aimed at the American church, which has been working on the sex abuse crisis for decades. The meeting is aimed at bishops around the world who do not understand the crisis and are making the same mistakes that the American bishops made in the past.

Thus, the meeting could be a disappointment for most Americans while still being a success for the universal church.

The same is true of his comments on the possibility of married priests, which many people expect to be discussed at the synod on the Amazon in October.

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"I am not in agreement with making celibacy optional," he told reporters. "I will not do it." He quoted Pope Paul VI, who said, "I would prefer to give my life before changing the law of celibacy."

But Francis left the door open for extreme situations, such as the Pacific islands and the Amazon region, where there might not be a priest for hundreds of miles.

"I believe that the issue must be open in this sense: where there is a pastoral problem because of the lack of priests," he said. "I will not say that it must be done. Because I have not reflected, I have not prayed sufficiently over this. But theologians must study."

He referred to a theologian he was reading who stated, "The church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the church."

"But where there is not the Eucharist … who will make the Eucharist?" Francis asked. The theologian mentioned the possibility of ordaining older married men for "celebrating the Mass, administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation and anointing the sick."



Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, left, leads the U.S. bishops' conference annual fall meeting on Nov. 13, 2018, in Baltimore. (AP/Patrick Semansky)

The pope's openness to discussing the ordination of married men "when there is a pastoral necessity" is a positive change from the absolute prohibition of such discussions in previous papacies. But his very narrow definition of "pastoral necessity" will disappoint many in North America and Europe who believe more priests are also needed in their areas.

At the same time, allowing married priests in extreme situations could be the camel's nose under the tent that makes further developments possible as more and more areas argue their pastoral necessity.

By lowering expectations, Francis is showing that he is not the revolutionary progressives hoped for or conservatives feared. He is at heart a compassionate pastor but also a realist, an incrementalist and a pragmatist. His respect for collegiality will not allow him to get too far out in front of the other bishops.

This will be a disappointment to some, but may be best for the universal church, which is composed of 1.2 billion believers from various cultures, traditions and political environments. Keeping this community together, while respecting differences, is the pope's job, even if it means lowering expectations.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a columnist for Religion News Service and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*.]

This story appears in the **Vatican Abuse Summit** feature series. View the full series.