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Pope Francis walks in procession with new cardinals during consistory in St. Peter's Basilica at

Pope Francis walks in procession with new cardinals during consistory in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 5, 2019. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Pope Francis' Oct. 25 announcement that he would be creating new Catholic cardinals next month came the same day the Italian government mandated a new "semi-lockdown" for the country's population, urging people not to travel outside their communities because of sharply increasing coronavirus infection numbers.

What are the 13 men now set to be inducted into the church's most select body of prelates during a Vatican ceremony Nov. 28 to do? Several of them are in their 70s and 80s, and may well be hesitant to travel during an ongoing global pandemic.

Typically, the new cardinals would join current cardinals in making their way to Rome for the event, known as a consistory. But several canon lawyers stressed to NCR that Francis could instead ask global cardinals to stay home, and conduct the ceremony without them.

"The fact is, they don't need to be here," Nicholas Cafardi, a civil and canon lawyer who has advised bishops and dioceses on canonical issues for decades, said about the new cardinals.

Cafardi noted that the church's Code of Canon Law specifies that cardinals are made "by a decree" of the pope that is "made public in the presence of the college of cardinals."

The canonist suggested that Francis could tell cardinals outside Rome to stay home, and have a smaller ceremony just with those who live in the Eternal City.

"Cardinals are established by decree," said the canonist. "It's not when [Francis] gives them their cardinalatial ring. It's not when he puts the biretta [red hat] on their heads. It's when the decree is published."

"People think the ceremony makes the man," said Cafardi. "It doesn't, at least not when you are a cardinal."

Mercy Sr. Sharon Euart, a former executive coordinator of the Canon Law Society of America, said that while a consistory would normally involve all the world's cardinals, the pandemic may require a change in practice.

"Living in the time of COVID-19 often calls for changes which necessitate departure from custom and even dispensation [from] the law," said Euart, now executive director of the Resource Center for Religious Institutes.

"It remains with Pope Francis to determine how the upcoming consistory will address physical presence during the COVID pandemic," she said.

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The Vatican press office did not immediately respond to a question about whether Francis had given special instructions to the cardinals about the Nov. 28 consistory.

Daily coronavirus infection rates in Italy have risen steadily since the beginning of October. The country's civil protection agency reported 21,273 new infections [on Oct. 25](#), more than three times as many as were reported on the worst day during the country's first peak in March.

The Italian government has released a series of new decrees in recent weeks to address the spike in cases. The latest decree, which went into effect Oct. 26, [ordered](#) the shutting of all bars and restaurants across the country at 6 p.m. each evening and "strongly recommended" Italians not leave their towns of residence.

Four of the 13 new cardinals are already over the age of 80, meaning they would be unable to enter into an eventual conclave to elect Francis' successor as pope. Three of those four are already based in Italy.

Of the nine new cardinals under 80, four are based in Italy. The two oldest of that group not based in Italy are Santiago, Chile Archbishop Celestino Aros Braco, 75; and Washington, D.C., Archbishop Wilton Gregory, 72.

Gregory may also have trouble entering Europe from the U.S. Most U.S. citizens have been barred from entering the continent since March, due to America's high coronavirus infection rate.

A typical consistory ceremony is held in St. Peter's Basilica, with each of the new cardinals formally receiving their ring and hat from Francis before the church's high altar.

Euart suggested that Francis could send those items to the new cardinals who live outside Rome through the Vatican's ambassador in their home country. "It's a new time calling for new practices," she said.

Fr. James Coriden, a canon lawyer who previously taught at the now closed Washington Theological Union, concurred. "It seems to me that the pope can configure the consistory as the circumstances demand," he said.

"Limit it to those cardinals in Rome, or even just a few of them depending on the status of the pandemic," Coriden suggested. "Certainly not all of the new ones need to be present."

At least one cardinal previously appointed by Francis was unable to come to Rome for his ceremony: the now deceased Loris Francesco Capovilla, who had served as Pope John XXIII's personal secretary. Made a cardinal by Francis in 2014 at age 98, Capovilla [instead received](#) his ring and hat at home from Cardinal Angelo Sodano, then dean of the College of Cardinals.

Cafardi noted that at the beginning of his papacy in March 2013, Francis [urged](#) Argentinians seeking to come to Rome to celebrate his election as pontiff to instead stay home and offer the money they would spend on the trip to those in need.

"Stay home, and give the money to the poor," the canonist suggested the pope might say to his newest cardinals. "Even more so now. Stay home, and don't risk your life traveling."

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