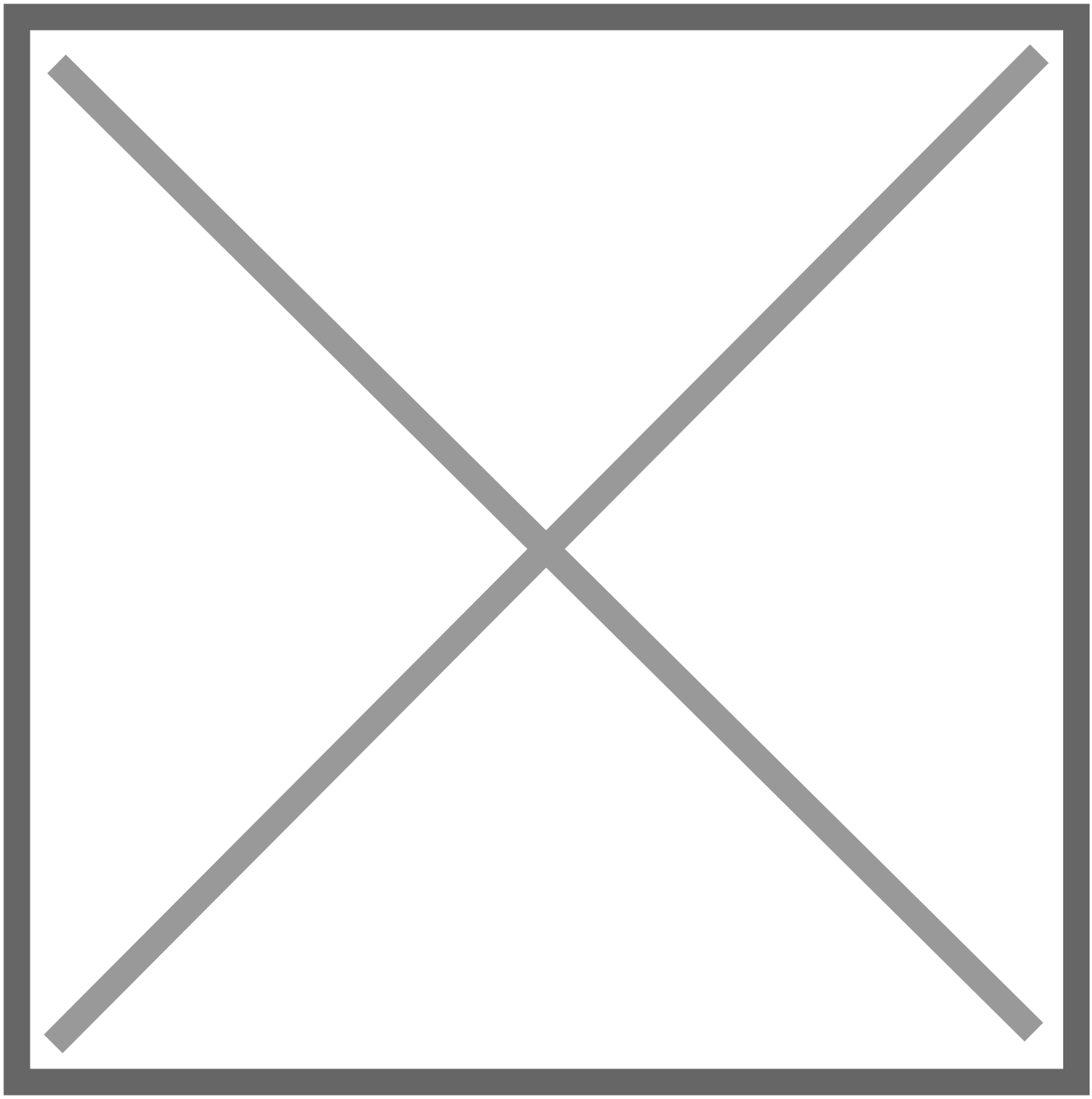


Pope Francis smiles as he arrives to lead his annual audience to give Christmas greetings to members of the Roman Curia at the Vatican Dec. 21, 2019. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Pope Francis Dec. 21 urged the bishops and cardinals who lead the Vatican's bureaucracy not to be in conflict with one another, warning that the Catholic Church can become polarized if the prelates appear always at odds.

In an annual pre-Christmas meeting that Francis has frequently used to upbraid his top Vatican officials, the pontiff acknowledged that the church may be in crisis due to scandals "past and present" but said crisis should not be confused with conflict.

"Crisis generally has a positive outcome, whereas conflict always creates discord and competition, an apparently irreconcilable antagonism that separates others into friends to love and enemies to fight," the pope told the prelates.

"When the church is viewed in terms of conflict — right versus left, progressive versus traditionalist — she becomes fragmented and polarized, distorting and betraying her true nature," said Francis.

"[The church] must never become a body in conflict, with winners and losers, for in this way she would spread apprehension, become more rigid and less synodal," the pope said.

Although previous pontiffs used the traditional pre-Christmas meeting with the Vatican's leadership to simply exchange brief holiday greetings, Francis has taken them as occasions to offer rather more serious speeches.

In 2014, for example, he told the bishops and cardinals about 15 "spiritual sicknesses" he said he had witnessed among them. In 2016, Francis lashed out at high-level prelates he said had been opposing his efforts to reform the Vatican, calling them a "malevolent resistance."

This year, Francis took a gentler tack. He reflected first on the difficulties faced by many during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, saying it offered the church an opportunity to reflect on "the meaning of a crisis."

The pope then gave examples of biblical figures who had come out of crises stronger, citing Abraham, Moses, Elijah, St. Paul and Jesus. He said their example "warns us against judging the church hastily on the basis of the crises caused by scandals past and present."

Francis did not identify the scandals in the church he was referring to. One scandal that rocked the Vatican throughout the fall was the September resignation of Cardinal Angelo Becciu, who had led the Vatican's saints congregation but has been accused in Italian newspapers of various financial improprieties.

The Vatican is yet to offer specific reasons for Becciu's resignation. The cardinal has denied any wrongdoing.

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Francis told the Vatican officials that they should not seek to hide from crises, but allow them to bring out needed changes.

"Everything evil, wrong, weak and unhealthy that comes to light serves as a forceful reminder of our need to die to a way of living, thinking and acting that does not reflect the Gospel," said the pontiff.

Referencing his own seven-year effort to reorganize the Vatican bureaucracy in conjunction with his advisory Council of Cardinals, the pope also said that efforts to renew the church cannot be like "putting a patch on an old garment, or simply drafting a new Apostolic Constitution."

"The church is always an earthen vessel, precious for what it contains and not for the way it may appear," said Francis. "These days it seems evident that the clay of

which we are made is chipped, damaged and cracked."

"We have to strive all the more, lest our frailty become an obstacle to the preaching of the Gospel rather than a testimony to the immense love with which God, who is rich in mercy, has loved us and continues to love us," said the pope.

Francis' meeting with the Vatican officials is normally held in the apostolic palace's 16th-century Clementine Hall but was moved this year to the larger Aula della Benedizione to allow the chairs for the prelates taking part to be more distanced from one another in line with Italy's coronavirus precautions.

Although the pope did not wear a mask during the event, most everyone else taking part did.

Francis met later in the morning with lay Vatican staff in the Paul VI audience hall. While the pope spoke at that event from a chair well distanced from others, he later went up to some of the people taking part to offer them rosaries and to hold a baby.

The pope promised the staff members that none would be let go because of the pandemic's effect on the Vatican's finances, which is known to have been substantial. In May, the Vatican's finance minister calculated between a 25% to 45% percent loss of revenue.

A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 8-21, 2021** print issue under the headline: Francis tells Vatican officials their conflict polarizes church.