Opinion
Vatican
NCR Voices

Pope Francis places a red biretta on new U.S. Cardinal Kevin Farrell during a consistory in St.

Pope Francis places a red biretta on new U.S. Cardinal Kevin Farrell during a consistory in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in this Nov. 19, 2016, file photo. The pope will create 20 new cardinals at an Aug. 27 consistory, further placing his mark on the College of Cardinals that will one day elect his successor. (CNS/Paul Haring)



Thomas Reese

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @thomasreeseSJ

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

August 25, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When the world's cardinals meet in Rome beginning Saturday (Aug. 27), Pope Francis will create 21 new cardinals, then ask them and their new colleagues in the

College of Cardinals to discuss his plans for reforming the Vatican Curia, the bureaucracy that helps him govern the Catholic Church.

This will give the cardinals a chance to say what they like or dislike about the operations of the Curia and the recent reforms Francis has instituted. It will also give them a chance to get to know one another in preparation for the conclave to elect a new pope when Francis dies — or retires.

Sixteen of the new cardinals are under the age of 80 and therefore able to vote for a new pope in a conclave. Francis has now appointed 83 (63%) of the cardinal electors. With Francis turning 86 in December, it's not unimaginable that these will be the last cardinals he will create. Then again, if he is still reigning when he turns 87, he could appoint at least another 17.

The new cardinals will join all the other cardinals in discussing "Praedicate Evangelium" ("Preach the Gospel"), the apostolic constitution that Francis issued in March, in which he laid out his reforms of the Curia.

Francis' most dramatic reform is opening top positions in the Curia to lay leadership. This means that the secretary of state or heads of the Dicastery for Doctrine of the Faith could be laypeople. A layman or laywoman could be put in charge of the office for finding episcopal candidates.

Related: Pope Francis' reforms to church governance are unlike any since Vatican II

How the cardinals, who are all clerics, respond to this revolution will be interesting to watch. Will they agree with Francis and his advisers that authority in the church comes from office, not ordination? Or will they argue that only the clergy can have decision-making authority?

While it will not affect the current Vatican cardinals, the church may see a future in which the Vatican has more lay leadership and fewer clerics and bishops. Some have suggested that these lay officials be made cardinals, but I think the fewer cardinals in the Curia the better: It is difficult to fire curial cardinals who are incompetent or not in sync with the pope.

A compromise would be to appoint pro-tem cardinals (both lay and clerical) in the Curia, who would lose their titles on the death or resignation of that pope and could not attend the conclave to elect the next one.

Many liberal commentators have rejoiced at what they see as the downgrading of the Secretariat of State and the Dicastery for Doctrine of the Faith. They believe that somehow the Dicastery for the Evangelization will become the top dog in the Vatican. I doubt it. It will be too busy doing its traditional job of taking care of the old missionary territories in the church.

The Secretariat of State has for centuries played a dominant role in the Vatican, especially on political topics. It also exercised a coordinating role within the Vatican bureaucracy.

Advertisement

The Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith, as the dicastery was previously known, was also very powerful when it came to doctrinal issues, having the final say, under the pope, on any document coming out of the Vatican. Prior to Francis, it also played doctrinal cop in policing the writings and teachings of theologians.

As someone who suffered under the congregation, I applaud the expansion of free discussion under Francis. But it's naive to think that the Vatican can run without someone under the pope acting as coordinator and even decision-maker on matters the pope does not want to deal with. Nor can the church have various Vatican offices issuing contradictory documents. When officials disagree, someone must step in, and it can't always be the pope.

Under Pope John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger, as head of the Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith, was the doctrinal czar. This freed the pope to travel and do other things. Francis needs helpers he trusts as much as John Paul trusted Ratzinger.

Structural change is important, but personnel is policy. The Vatican needs to be structured so the pope can more easily replace officials who are not performing as they should. A beautiful organizational chart is worthless without the proper people occupying the offices. Francis has taken too long to replace people who came into power under John Paul and Benedict. And some of those Francis has appointed need to be replaced because they failed to perform as he hoped.

If the church is a field hospital, as Francis has said, the hospital director needs to make sure the doctors are healing patients, not making matters worse.

Related: Pope Francis appoints cardinals, setting stage for election of his successor

Francis has rarely consulted consistories on these topics, preferring the broader representation of the synod of bishops. John Paul used the consistory system frequently to discuss topics, allowing the cardinals to get to know one another, which is useful prior to a conclave. At this consistory, the cardinals will be listening to what is said but perhaps paying more attention to who says it. This will be their chance to check out candidates for the next conclave, whenever it might occur.

This story appears in the **Consistory 2022** feature series. View the full series.