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Pope Francis speaks to Vatican employees and their families ahead of Christmas in the Paul V

Pope Francis speaks to Vatican employees and their families ahead of Christmas in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Dec. 21, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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Pope Francis on Dec. 21 cautioned top Vatican officials against becoming rigid and obsessing over ideology, saying that such habits can prevent the Catholic Church from growing.

"Fear, rigidity and monotony make for an immobility that has the apparent advantage of not creating problems…but lead us to wander aimlessly within our labyrinths, to the detriment of the service we are called to offer the church and the whole world," said the pope.

Francis offered the warning in his annual pre-Christmas address to the Roman Curia — the Vatican's central bureaucracy — where he warned that rigid ideological positions, even if motivated by good intentions, can "separate us from reality and prevent us from moving forward."

His remarks come just three days after the Vatican's doctrinal office released a landmark document, announcing there had been a "development" in the church's understanding of blessings that now allows Catholic priests to bless couples in same-sex unions, and straight couples who have been divorced and remarried.

The decision has been met with mixed reactions with some church leaders hailing it as progress, while others condemning it as inconsistent with the church's long-standing teaching that marriage is a sacrament celebrated between one man and one woman.

While the pope did not explicitly reference the Dec. 18 declaration from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Francis was adamant in his address that it was the duty of church officials to be attentive to the pastoral needs and realities of those whom they are tasked to serve.

"In our service here in the Curia too, it is important to keep faring forward, to keep searching and growing in our understanding of the truth, overcoming the temptation to stand still and never leave the 'labyrinth' of our fears," said the pope.

Christianity, he continued, "is not meant to confirm our sense of security, to let us settle into comfortable religious certitudes, and to offer us quick answers to life’s complex problems."

"The lives of people and the world around us are, and will always remain, superior to ideas and theories," said Francis.

The annual pre-Christmas speech is among the pope's most closely watched Vatican addresses that he delivers each year. In past years, he has often used the occasion to chastise church administrators for their perceived shortcomings.

Most famously, in 2014, the pope excoriated the Curia for what he identified as 15 "diseases" that plagued their work. More recently, in 2022, the pope said they should be aware of an "elegant demon" among them that could distract from their service to the church.

This year, the pope's remarks were predominantly future-minded, telling the heads of Vatican offices that rather than becoming "entangled in the web of bureaucracy," they should always be willing "to look up, to start afresh from God, to be enlightened by his word and to find the courage needed to start anew."

In assessing how they should prioritize and conduct their respective tasks, the pope said the work of the curia should always be defined by the "art of listening."

Listening to others, he said, means a willingness to "abandon the patterns and prejudices that at times lead us to pigeonhole those around us." Doing so, he added, would make the church more "sensitive" to how to discern how to better respond to the concrete needs of people, including a willingness to change course.

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The pope went on to quote from the words of a priest who once remarked to him that "it is not easy to rekindle the embers under the ashes of the church."

"Today we strive to kindle passion in those who have long since lost it," he said.

Francis recalled that 60 years have passed since the Second Vatican Council — a period from 1962-1965 that ushered in sweeping new reforms for the Catholic Church — and that today there are still debates about the council's reception among so-called conservatives and progressives.

"The real difference is between lovers and those who have lost that initial passion. That is the difference," he said. "Only those who love can walk forward."

Francis, who turned 87 on Dec. 17 and in recent weeks has suffered a serious bout with bronchitis that left him struggling to speak at times, spoke with ease for some 25 minutes. Following his remarks, the pope individually greeted each Vatican official, often laughing and engaging in animated conversation.

Earlier in the day on Dec. 21, the pope also met with the employees of the Holy See and Vatican city-state, along with their family members. In the days ahead, Francis is scheduled to preside over a Christmas Eve Mass and to deliver his traditional "Urbi et Orbi" address and blessing on Christmas Day.