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Pope Leo XIV delivers the Angelus noon prayer in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Sunday, Dec. 21, 2025. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

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Pope Leo XIV urged Vatican cardinals on Monday to put their ambitions of power and personal interests aside, as he followed in Pope Francis' footsteps and used a Christmas greeting to gently criticize his closest collaborators.

"Is it possible to be friends in the Roman Curia?" Leo asked the cardinals and bishops who make up the Curia, as the Holy See bureaucracy is known. "To have relationships of genuine fraternal friendship?"

The fact that Leo asked the question suggests that the American pope knows well that the Curia remains a difficult and sometimes toxic workplace, one that Francis would often eviscerate in his annual Christmas addresses.

Leo didn't repeat Francis' more biting critique — that Vatican clergy sometimes suffer from "spiritual Alzheimers," the "cancer" of cliques, the "corruption" of ambition and "self-absorbed" idle gossip — and his tone was far more gentle and constructive.

But the underlying message remained. Leo, who was very close to Francis and worked in the Vatican for two years before his election, didn't shy away from Francis' tradition of using the Christmas occasion to urge Vatican bureaucrats to examine their consciences and change their ways for the good of the church.

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"At times this bitterness finds its way among us as well, when, after many years of service in the Curia, we observe with disappointment that certain dynamics — linked to the exercise of power, the desire to prevail, or the pursuit of personal interests — are slow to change," Leo said.

"Amid daily toil, it is a grace to find trustworthy friends, where masks fall away, no one is used or sidelined, genuine support is offered, and each person's worth and competence are respected, preventing resentment and dissatisfaction."

After Francis' sometimes tumultuous 12-year pontificate, in which the Argentine Jesuit at times alienated conservatives and some in the Vatican bureaucracy, Leo has generally sought to be more of a peacemaker prizing unity.

He called Monday for Vatican bureaucrats to work to forge communion within the church and beyond.

"In a world wounded by discord, violence and conflict, where we also witness a growth in aggression and anger, often exploited by both the digital sphere and politics, Christmas invites everyone to work for peace and universal fraternity," he said.