Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Leo XIV reads his speech to officials of the Roman Curia and the College of Cardinals during his annual pre-Christmas meeting with them in the Hall of Blessing above the atrium of St. Peter's Basilica on Dec. 22, 2025, at the Vatican. (Video screen grab)



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January 5, 2026
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All the cardinals of the Catholic Church have been called to Rome by Pope Leo XIV for his first extraordinary consistory from Jan. 7-8 to discuss several topics, including the Roman Curia.

An extraordinary consistory can be called by the pope "when the special needs of the church or the conducting of more serious affairs suggests that it should be held," according to the Code of Canon Law.

The Roman Curia, or the Holy See administrative institutions, is a perennial topic whenever bishops and cardinals get together. Reforming it was on the agenda of the first extraordinary consistory of John Paul II in 1979, and again in 1982 and 1985. The topic has often been brought up at other meetings in Rome, including synods, consistories and at the meetings of cardinals before conclaves.

According to Elise Ann Allen, senior correspondent at Crux, in a Dec. 12 letter, the pope asked the cardinals to read and reflect on Francis' 2022 apostolic constitution reforming the Roman curia, *Praedicate Evangelium*. He asked them to give particular consideration to "the relationship of mutual interiority that exists between the universal Church and the particular Church" (article 4).The relationship between the Curia and diocesan bishops has always been a sensitive topic in the church. It is the church equivalent to the American debate over federalism, the relationship between the national government and state governments.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, authority in the church was highly centralized in the papacy. The council stressed the role of the bishop as the vicar of Christ in his diocese and the role of bishops' conferences.

After the council, the debate became politicized with liberals stressing the role of bishops and bishops' conferences during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, while conservatives stressed the role of the pope. Liberals and conservatives switched sides during the papacy of Francis.

In other words, if you like the pope, you support a centralized church. If you don't, you support decentralization. It is much like Republicans and Democrats switching sides in the debate over the power of the president depending on which party is in power. Theology has very little to do with it.

The focus on article 4 indicates that Leo's approach to curial reform is similar to that of Francis, who thought that curial reform could be done through calling curial workers to personal conversion and spiritual renewal. I agree with this approach, but we must acknowledge that it has not been that successful. It is essential, but not sufficient. Francis frequently preached conversion to the Curia, but his words were not well received.

It is the approach of a pastor — not an American CEO.

As a Christian, I must believe in the possibility of conversion, but as a social scientist, I have rarely seen it. Part of this is due to human nature that finds change difficult. If an employee is unwilling to adapt to changing goals and technologies, then that employee has to be fired. That includes anyone in the Curia, including cardinals, who do not support the pope's agenda.

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While conversion of heart on the part of Vatican employees is essential to change the culture of the institution, there is still a need for structural change that provides the framework for operating well. A strong department of justice and a strong finance department are essential for the Vatican if it is going to operate effectively and efficiently without more scandals.

But the environment and structures of an organization are also important if it is going to be effective and efficient.

In looking at the Curia, it is important to distinguish between what is unique to the church and what is comparable to secular organizations. The church should learn from secular organizations and adopt best practices when appropriate. Secular organizations run museums, do construction, buy supplies, use IT, manage rental properties, invest endowments, clean and repair buildings, draw up and manage budgets, and do HR. There is nothing sacred or special about these activities, and the Vatican practices should follow the highest standards. Where necessary, management consultants should be brought in to identify problems and solutions.

Financial management has always been a problem in the Vatican. The Vatican Bank was involved in scandal and the Secretariat of State lost about $150 million in a fraudulent London real estate deal. A top priority for the pope should be getting control of Vatican finances. The Vatican Bank was cleaned up under Benedict and Francis, but APSA, the Vatican sovereign wealth fund, needs serious examination and reform, as do other offices.

Reform is not cheap. It cost millions of dollars in consultant and auditor fees to clean up the Vatican Bank. Likewise, reforming APSA will also cost significant money. But Catholic donors will step up if they can be assured that reforms will be implemented.

The Vatican needs a strong finance department that can impose modern financial controls on the Curia. No one from cardinals on down can be exempt from these controls, and those who are noncompliant should be subject to penalties, including dismissal.

The Vatican also needs a Department of Justice to investigate and prosecute crimes against persons and property. Currently, the responsibility for investigating canonical and civil crimes is scattered among the various offices in the Curia.

For example, sex abuse is dealt with by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. Misappropriation of church funds by a bishop or religious order would be dealt with somewhere else. And in many cases, the roles of investigator, prosecutor and judge are not distinguished, leading to complaints about due process.

We obviously do not want to bring back the Inquisition, but the sex abuse crisis and the recent Vatican trial of Cardinal Angelo Becciu and others show that there is a

need for a department staffed by competent investigators and lawyers. A separate bench of judges could pass judgment on the evidence provided by prosecutors.

It is time for American management practices in the Vatican. If an American pope cannot do that, we will have more scandals in the future.