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Analysis



Pope Leo XIV arrives for his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, Wednesday, Jan. 7, 2026. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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A day after closing out the 2025 Holy Year, Pope Leo XIV on Wednesday opened a new phase of his pontificate by gathering the world's cardinals to Rome and indicating some reform-minded priorities going forward.

For starters, Leo signalled an emphasis on more fully implementing the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the 1960s meetings that modernized and revolutionized the Catholic Church. He called the Vatican II teachings the "guiding star" of the church.

Leo told his weekly general audience that for the foreseeable future, he would devote his weekly catechism lessons to a rereading of key Vatican II documents, noting that the generation of bishops and theologians who had attended the meetings and crafted the reforms are dead.

"Therefore, while we hear the call not to let its prophecy fade, and to continue to seek ways and means to implement its insights, it will be important to get to know it again closely, and to do so not through hearsay or interpretations that have been given, but by rereading its documents and reflecting on their content," he said. "Indeed, it is the magisterium that still constitutes the guiding star of the church's journey today."

Among other things, Vatican II allowed for use of the vernacular rather than Latin for Mass. It called for greater participation of lay faithful in the life of the church and revolutionized Catholic relations with Jews and people of other faiths.

Leo turns to the College of Cardinals for support

Leo has also indicated a reform-minded agenda for his two-day meeting of cardinals, which gets under way Wednesday afternoon.

He called the consistory, as such meetings are known, to begin the day after he closed the 2025 Holy Year, suggesting that he too saw the end of the Jubilee as an opportunity to unofficially start his pontificate and look ahead to his own agenda.

Leo's first few months as pope were dominated by fulfilling the intense Holy Year obligations of meeting with pilgrimage groups, celebrating special Jubilee audiences

and Masses and wrapping up the outstanding matters of Pope Francis' pontificate.

The Vatican said Leo's first consistory was aimed at "fostering common discernment and offering support and advice to the Holy Father in the exercise of his high and grave responsibility in the government of the universal church."

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It was a significant gesture, since Francis had relied not on consistories or the College of Cardinals as a whole to help him govern, but rather a small, hand-picked group of nine cardinals who met every few months at the Vatican.

Before the May conclave that elected Leo, cardinals had complained about Francis' go-it-alone governing style, suggesting that Leo is responding to their requests to be consulted more about running the 1.4-billion strong church.

A Francis-style agenda

On the agenda is a discussion of two of Francis' key reform documents: his original mission statement issued at the start of his pontificate, and the 2022 document that reformed the Vatican bureaucracy. Also being discussed is Francis' call for the church to be more "synodal," or responsive to the needs of rank-and-file Catholics, and a discussion of the liturgy, according to Vatican News.

The last agenda item is believed to refer to divisions within the church over the old Latin Mass, which was celebrated before the Vatican II reforms allowed Mass in different languages, with the active participation of the faithful.

Francis had greatly restricted the celebration of the old Latin Mass, arguing its spread in recent years had created divisions in the church. But Francis' crackdown fueled a strong conservative and traditionalist backlash against him, especially in the United States, which the Chicago-born Leo seems keen to try to pacify.

There are currently 245 cardinals, almost equally split between those who are under age 80 and voted in the conclave that elected Leo, and those who are older. The Vatican hasn't said how many are expected to attend.

One senior cardinal, though, was listed prominently on Leo's agenda of private audiences Wednesday: Cardinal Joseph Zen, the retired archbishop of Hong Kong.

Zen, who turns 94 next week, was a fierce conservative critic of Francis, especially over the pope's outreach to China, and complained for years that the Argentine Jesuit wouldn't receive him in private audience.