



A file photo shows a bride places a ring on her groom's finger during their wedding. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

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Ten years after Pope Francis sent shock waves through the Catholic Church with his outreach to divorced and civilly remarried Catholics, Pope Leo XIV is inviting church leaders to Rome next week to understand how Francis' document has been implemented.

Vatican officials on Friday stressed that Francis' 2016 text "The Joy of Love" isn't up for rewriting, amending or scrapping. Rather, the weeklong closed-door conference starting Wednesday is meant to understand how bishops have incorporated the document's teaching into their local communities.

Francis' document covers a host of issues relating to how the Catholic Church can better minister to families today. But when it was released after a yearslong consultation, "The Joy of Love" immediately sparked controversy because it opened the door to letting civilly remarried Catholics receive Communion.

Church teaching holds that unless these Catholics obtain an annulment — a church decree that their first marriage was invalid — they cannot receive the sacraments, since they are seen as living in sin and committing adultery.

Francis didn't create a church-wide pass for these Catholics, but suggested — in vague terms and a single, strategically placed footnote — that bishops and priests could do so on a case-by-case basis after accompanying them on a spiritual journey of discernment.

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Subsequent comments and writings made clear Francis intended such wiggle room, part of his belief that God's mercy extends in particular to sinners and that the Eucharist isn't a prize for the perfect but nourishment for the weak.

The document became one of the most divisive of Francis' pontificate and in many ways became the focal point of conservative opposition to his papacy. Mostly conservative Catholics said it had sown confusion among the faithful about the church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage. Some even accused Francis of heresy.

A conference not to rewrite the text, but see what next steps are

On Friday, Vatican officials said it would be up to the 187 participants whether specific points of Francis' document would be discussed and how, insisting there was no prewritten final document.

"We can't foresee what themes will emerge from the bishops' reflections, from their experiences," said Gabriella Gambino, undersecretary in the Vatican's family office, which is organizing the meeting.

Fr. Giacomo Costa, of the Vatican's synod office, said the Oct. 7-14 meeting was not a continuation of the synod on the family that provided the consultation leading to Francis' text or a chance to rewrite it.

"This is not a continuation of the synod itself, but rather an opportunity to assess where we stand," he told a Vatican briefing. "It does not mean passing judgment as in school — praising or criticizing the text itself — but rather learning from the experience gained since its publication."

He said organizers expect differences, disagreements, tensions and open questions to emerge.

"We don't want to arrive at an artificial consensus," he said, though he added a final summary was expected to be published.