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Pope says structures for collaboration, collegiality need strengthening

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — A meeting with Pope Francis designed as reflection on the last Synod of Bishops turned into a group reflection on strengthening the synod itself and the way the world's bishops assist the pope.

Meeting Thursday with members of the ordinary council of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis said there needs to be greater reflection on "the church, the mother church, with all its nuances, including that of synodality."

Pope Francis said each of the eight cardinals he named in April to advise him on the reform of the Roman Curia mentioned the need to "find a path for coordination between synodality and the bishop of Rome."

The work of the world Synod of Bishops, which has gathered bishops at the Vatican every three or four years to discuss a theme and make recommendations to the pope, "has to take a new path that expresses its uniqueness when united with the Petrine ministry," he said. "This is a big challenge."

Australian Cardinal George Pell of Sydney spoke about the possibility of expanding the role of the synod council to be a more regular advisory body for the pope, one that would meet with the pope for several hours two or three times a year to discuss a specific topic.

Pell and two other council members -- Cardinals Oswald Gracias of Mumbai, India, and Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya of Kinshasha, Congo -- also are part of the eight-member group Pope Francis named in April to advise him about reforming the Roman Curia.

The pope told the synod council that the advisory group would be expanded by one "because our Eastern brothers were a bit angry that they weren't represented. So, one's missing, but he still hasn't been chosen."

In the text prepared for the meeting Thursday -- a text the pope said would be handed to the council members -- Pope Francis had described the synods as "one of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council" and a structure "at the service of the mission and communion of the church, as an expression of collegiality."

"Open to the grace of the Holy Spirit, the soul of the church, we trust that the Synod of Bishops will undergo further developments to further promote dialogue and collaboration among the bishops and between the bishops and the bishop of Rome," he had written.

While the pope did not read his prepared text, audio from the meeting Thursday was broadcast in the Vatican press office.

Council members were invited to tell the pope their initial ideas for the next world Synod of Bishops. Their suggestions included: the meaning of the church, the church's encounter with the world, collegiality and "synodality" -- basically the relationship between the College of Bishops and the pope -- ecology, the family, interreligious dialogue and formation of the laity.

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After listening to several cardinals' suggestions, the pope joked, "The cake is only half cooked, huh?"

The council members were to continue meeting and to vote on three possible themes to suggest to the pope. He told them, "I'd take a fourth, too."

Pope Francis said, "The family is a serious problem. ... Today many people, even Catholics, don't get married but live together. Marriage is seen as provisional. It's a serious problem."

The pope said that in October, he and his cardinal-advisers would discuss who they would entrust with "a study on pastoral work with families. The synod? A special synod? With the presidents of bishops' conferences? This is a problem that we'll look at in October."

Another important theme, he said, is ecology, not in the strict sense of environmentalism, but regarding the relationship between what Catholics have called "human ecology and creation," an ecology that begins with the human person -- the sacredness of human life, human dignity and the obligation of human beings to protect each other and the environment.

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