

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 25, 2013 at 8:57am

Hopes for church reform rest on Pope Francis' gang of eight

by Thomas Reese

Analysis

Great hopes have been placed in the eight cardinals who will arrive in Rome next week to advise the pope. Pope Francis appointed these cardinals, all but one from outside of Rome, to help him come up with a plan to reform the Vatican. Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston is the only American on the committee.

What can we expect from these cardinals, who will meet Oct. 1-3? Will it be just another Vatican meeting that accomplishes little, or will it move the church toward real reform? How can we judge whether the meeting is a success?

The typical meeting in Rome occurs behind closed doors and consists of long speeches by curial officials or their favorite "experts" with little time for discussion or questions. At the end of the meeting, a press release is issued full of quotes from church documents, pious generalizations, and assertions about how fruitful the meeting was.

I doubt Francis will put up with that standard practice. He has the typical Jesuit impatience with long, meaningless meetings. Nor does he consider meetings helpful if all they do is produce documents.

The second, more likely danger is that the gang of eight will arrive in Rome unprepared and just have a brainstorming session. If that is all that happens, then the cardinals will have failed the pope. Pope Francis is 76 years old, and his papacy will only last five to 10 years. He needs a reform plan now. The October meeting will be productive only if the cardinals have already had a series of phone conversations before coming to Rome. They also should have been consulting experts in their home countries so they could come to the meeting with concrete proposals.

But if the press release says the cardinals had a wonderful discussion with the pope and they agreed that collegiality and subsidiarity should be the guiding principles for curial reform, you can be assured no one has a plan and they wasted six months. Ever since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), reformers have been calling for more collegiality and subsidiarity (decentralization) in the church. You would have to be Rip Van Winkle to have missed that discussion. The tough question is how to institutionalize collegiality and subsidiarity.

The third danger is that they fail to distinguish between comprehensive reform and better management. Good management is not rocket science or theology. It involves adopting the best practices of business and government in managing finances and personnel, such as standard accounting practices, good financial records, internal and external audits, open and competitive bidding on contracts, transparency, conflict of interest rules, etc. The National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management has even drawn up Standards for Excellence for dioceses and parishes based on canon law and best practices in business. In any case, management consulting firms help organizations implement such management reforms all the time. It requires support from the organization's leadership, training programs for staff, and the willingness to replace employees who are unable or unwilling to get with the program.

Four officials in the Vatican are essential to management reform: the heads of the Institute for the Works of Religion (Vatican bank), Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See (Vatican finance office), the Prefecture for Economic Affairs (comptroller), and the Vatican City State. If these officials are not able or willing to make it happen, they must be replaced, preferably by experienced laypeople from outside the Vatican. There is no need for clerics in any of these jobs.

Comprehensive reform is another issue. Reform must go way beyond tinkering with *Pastor Bonus*, the 1988 papal document governing the Curia. Closing or merging a couple of offices like the Council for Culture is not comprehensive reform. Comprehensive reform requires a new vision of the role of the Roman Curia in the governance of the church. It must take collegiality and subsidiarity seriously and institutionalize them in church structures.

What would comprehensive reform look like? At a minimum, comprehensive reform requires three essential elements:

- Stop making Vatican officials bishops or cardinals
- Remove all curial officials from the committees (congregations and councils) that oversee curial offices and replace them with diocesan cardinals and bishops nominated by the synod of bishops and/or bishops' conferences
- Remove all curial officials from the synod of bishops and have it meet at least once every five years

These reforms would transform the Curia from a royal court into a modern civil service that acts as staff to the pope as head of the college of bishops. The three reforms would make clear that the Curia is not part of the magisterium but in service to the pope and the college of bishops. They would also make it easier for the pope to appoint and remove Vatican officials.

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Without these changes, whatever power the Curia loses during this papacy will be regained in the next. Without these changes, whatever power is gained by local bishops and bishops conferences today will be

taken back in the future. We saw this happen during the papacy of John Paul II, when the Curia re-established its pre-eminence after Vatican II.

Finally, the gang of eight needs to challenge the pope when he is wrong.

First, they need to tell him he should have taken a vacation this summer. He is not a young man, and he must pace himself for the long haul. And while they are at it, they should demand a report on his health and make sure he is taking care of himself. And if they are afraid to do this, they should ask the Jesuit superior general to do it. That is one of the jobs of Jesuit superiors, and the pope is still a Jesuit. We cannot afford a repeat of John Paul I.

Second, the gang of eight needs to tell the pope he cannot be his own chief of staff. He needs someone who understands him and whom he trusts to play gatekeeper and implementer. Everything does not have to go through his chief of staff, but Francis needs someone who will filter out the stuff he does not need to see so he can focus on what is really important. He also needs an enforcer willing to knock heads together in order to achieve the pope's agenda.

Traditionally, the pope's chief of staff has been the *sostituto*, or substitute, in the first section of the Secretariat of State. Under Paul VI, Archbishop Giovanni Benelli as the *sostituto* exercised great authority over the Curia. Under John Paul II, the pope's personal secretary, Stanisław Dziwisz, acted as the de facto chief of staff, deciding who and what the pope saw and interpreting his mind for curial officials. The pope recently confirmed as *sostituto* Archbishop Giovanni Angelo Becciu, who had the job when the pope was elected. If he does not work out, the pope should quickly replace him.

It is difficult to remember another time when the hopes of the church were so focused on the eight men meeting in the Vatican. Pope Francis has challenged clericalism and careerism in the church. He describes leadership as service. He models what it means to be a servant leader. By doing this, he is attempting to change the institutional culture of the church, to make it simpler and more collegial.

The pope was absolutely correct in his recent interview when he said, "The first reform must be the attitudes. ... The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials." He also warned against thinking "changes and reforms can take place in a short time."

"We always need time to lay the foundations for real, effective change," he said.

On the other hand, his attempts to change attitudes need to be supported by structural reforms in the Roman Curia. We have been waiting and preparing for change since Vatican II, where the foundations for change were laid. Will the gang of eight produce a plan? Let's hope so.

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