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Pope Francis formalizes cardinal reform group, reserves decision-making

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Vatican City — Pope Francis has formalized the structure of the group of cardinals advising him on reforming the Roman Catholic church, organizing them as a kind of royal council asked to give counsel but not make decisions.

The group, now formally known as the "council of cardinals," will assist in reorganization of the Vatican bureaucracy and will "help me with governance of the universal church," the pope stated in a formal letter outlining the structure.

The pope signed the letter, officially known as a chirograph, Saturday but announced it at a Vatican press briefing Monday.

During the briefing, Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi stated several times that the cardinals' group was to offer advice, but all decisions would be left to the pope.

"It's only a council, it's not a decision-making group," Lombardi said. "I would not speak of collegial governance in this group. It's a new form of consultation."

The cardinals' group is meeting at the Vatican for the first time Tuesday through Thursday. The meeting, the first of its kind, has generated speculation over what kind of things might be on the cardinals' agenda or what kind of reforms might be expected to result.

In announcing the consultation in April, the pope used similar language as he did in this weekend's letter, saying it was meant to "study a project of revision" of the Vatican document outlining the church's central

bureaucracy.

Eight cardinals currently sit on the group, including one from six the seven continents. Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley is the only American. Cardinal Oscar Maradiaga Rodriguez, the archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, is serving as its "coordinator."

Lombardi said Monday the pope is free to add members to the group if he so chooses. The Jesuit also said the current eight members had been conducting consultations with people and groups in their countries over what should be discussed at the Vatican meeting.

The pope, Lombardi said, has been consulting each of the eight cardinals separately, and the cardinals have also been talking to one each other in advance of the meeting. The cardinals in the group already in Rome also had an informal meeting Saturday.

The group and the pope, Lombardi said, will begin meeting together Tuesday in the library of the official papal apartments. The pope will take part in each day of the meeting, leaving for a time Wednesday to conduct his weekly general audience with pilgrims, Lombardi said.

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The working language of the meeting will be Italian, Lombardi said.

The spokesman also said there should be no expectation that the initial meeting will result in any changes in the church.

"Don't expect any conclusions or publications of documents, any surprising decisions," he said. "This is the first meeting."

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