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# New-look synod on marriage is first fruit of G-8

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A first fruit from the Oct. 1-3 meeting of the pope's new Council of Cardinals is already clear, with announcement of the theme for the next Synod of Bishops and plans for significant changes in the process designed to make it more participatory, substantive and efficient.

The Vatican announced Tuesday that the theme of the synod will be "The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization," with the meeting to take place Oct. 5-19, 2014, in Rome.

Given the topic, the thorny pastoral question of Communion for divorced and civilly remarried Catholics is destined to arise. On other occasions, Francis has hinted at openness to a greater degree of flexibility on the issue, perhaps along the lines of the Orthodox tradition.

Demonstrating his interest in the impending synod, Francis took the unusual step Monday of leaving the Domus Santa Marta where he's living and where people who have business with the pope typically come to him in order to travel down the Via della Conciliazione by car in order to join a working meeting of the bishops who make up the synod's secretariat.

The Council of Cardinals dedicated a good chunk of their first meeting with the pope last week to the synod, in part because Francis had indicated he wanted it to happen soon, but in a new way.

Founded by Pope Paul VI in 1965 at the close of the Second Vatican Council, the Synod of Bishops was designed as a way for the pope to hear the voice of local churches in making decisions. Generally it brings together roughly 300 bishops and other participants for a three-week gathering in Rome.

Over the years, critics have complained that preparations for the synod often don't foster real consultation, that conclusions sometimes appear determined in advance, and that too much time is wasted on speech-making.

Sources tell *NCR* that impending revisions to the synod envision a multiphase process involving widespread opportunities for input at the base, including use of the Internet to collect suggestions.

After a first meeting in Rome, a draft set of proposals to the pope would be sent back to the base for further reaction and discussion and would only be adopted in a second session.

The lone figure from outside the Council of Cardinals to address the group last week was Italian Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, tapped by Francis on Sept. 21 as the new head of the Synod of Bishops.

On other fronts, sources say the Council of Cardinals discussed the future of the secretary of state, by tradition considered the Vatican's prime minister, with a basic sense that it may be a mistake to concentrate responsibility both for foreign relations and internal church governance in one figure.

The Secretariat of State is already divided into two sections, corresponding to those two tasks. It remains to be

seen whether they be formally separated into two separate departments or whether Francis will gradually and informally shift responsibility for internal governance elsewhere, allowing the new secretary of state, Italian Archbishop Pietro Parolin, to concentrate on foreign affairs.

Parolin is to take office Oct. 15. Most of the cardinals on the council seemed to view the Parolin appointment positively based on his reputation for competence and a strong work ethic, though one cardinal on background expressed hope that Francis won't rely exclusively on "Italian diplomats" to fill key roles as time goes on, desiring a greater degree of "internationalization" of Vatican operations.

There was apparently interest among the cardinals in the hypothesis of a new position for coordinating the work of the Vatican's various departments, though probably not under the title of "Moderator of the Curia." In part, that's because it's a term in canon law used for a diocesan official who's often also the vicar for clergy, and the cardinals don't want to create a "vice pope."

Sources emphasized that Pope Francis was highly engaged in discussions with the cardinals, displaying a strong grasp of detail.

*NCR* confirmed that two other matters came up during the discussions: the church's sex abuse scandals and the question of honorifics bestowed by the papacy.

Lombardi told reporters during a midday briefing Oct. 3 that there hadn't been any discussion of the sex abuse issue, but it apparently did come up later that afternoon.

In general, sources say Francis affirmed his commitment to a strong "zero tolerance" policy for abuse by church personnel.

Prior to the council's meeting, Francis had used a Sept. 30 consistory, called to ratify the canonization date for Popes John Paul II and John XXIII, to take the temperature of cardinals on the idea of creating national or regional tribunals for sex abuse cases, seen by experts as potentially especially helpful for regions of the world that lack expertise and resources in the area.

Sources say, however, that project may not move forward soon, in part because there's still opposition in some quarters to the new rules adopted by Benedict XVI under which these cases are handled -- including, those sources say, concerns about the due process rights of accused priests.

The Council of Cardinals also took up the matter of bestowing honorifics, such as the habit of naming priests "honorary prelates" and thereby allowing them to use the title of monsignor.

Pope Francis has hinted at a desire to scale back such practices as part of a broader effort to project a more modest and pastoral vision of leadership.

Finally, the cardinals also apparently expressed a desire to see a stronger lay role inside the Vatican itself, including the possibility that certain strictly administrative offices, such as the Government of the Vatican City State, don't need to be entrusted to clergy.

Francis currently has an eight-member commission studying the economic and administrative structures of the Holy See, and one cardinal told *NCR* on background this week that the commission is "working very well."

"Those of us who want to see real change," the cardinal said, "have reason to be optimistic."

[NCR's national correspondent, Joshua J. McElwee, also contributed to this story. Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr.]

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