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Academics to cardinals: Move Vatican offices, give bigger lay role

by Joshua J. McElwee

NCR Today

An international federation of Catholic academics has proposed three key changes in the governance of the global church and is sending their recommendations to the group of cardinals advising Pope Francis on reform of the Vatican bureaucracy.

Pax Romana, considered one of the oldest movements of Catholic laypeople, makes the proposals in a white paper released online Tuesday.

Among the recommendations: a global meeting of laypeople partially tasked with helping the Vatican better include women in its highest positions, and moving at least some Vatican offices away from Rome to places around the world.

"As a witness and a sign of the universality of the Catholic mission and communion, we believe that certain curial offices could be relocated to major centers outside Europe," the group writes in its three-page proposal, suggesting the Vatican might move some positions to Hong Kong, Nairobi, or Beirut.

"We recognize the positive logistical benefits of having all curial offices in the same location and the symbolic power of being in proximity to the Chair of St. Peter," they state. "However, we believe that the relocation of some curial offices and/ or opening of satellite offices outside of Europe would be an important witness to the call and example of the Holy Father for the church to 'go to the margins' and for the church to become a 'church that is poor and for the poor.' "

Organized as two separate groups for students and graduated academics, Pax Romana was founded in 1921 and is recognized as a lay association by the Vatican and has special consultative status with the

Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

The group for academics, also known as the International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs, boasts members in more than 60 countries across five continents. Its members are the leaders of national associations of Catholic intellectuals and professionals.

Kevin Ahern, an assistant professor of theology at Manhattan College in New York who also serves as the academics' group's vice president for North America, said in a phone interview Wednesday that his group hoped to "stimulate conversation" about possible Vatican reforms with their proposals.

"We're hoping to have a conversation within our members and at the grassroots level ... at this important time in the church," Ahern said.

Before publishing their proposals, Ahern said, his group conducted consultation within its membership and with theologians and others around the world. "What we're the most important ideas ... that we had to communicate in this period," Ahern said members asked of each other and the others. The group, Ahern said, also sent out a questionnaire to its members earlier this year asking what they regarded as the "Hopes and Challenges of the Catholic Church."

Ahern, who previously led Pax Romana's international student group, said the academics had sent their white paper to several of the cardinals serving on the group of eight the pope has asked to advise him on reforming the Vatican's central bureaucracy, also known as the Roman Curia.

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The cardinals' group met for the first time Oct. 1-3 and is set to meet again Dec. 3-5 in Rome.

While the Vatican spokesman has said the Vatican will not release specifics of the cardinals' agenda in those meetings, sources told *NCR* after the first meeting of the group that discussions included a focus on how to involve laity more in day-to-day operations of the Vatican.

Other reports following the first meeting suggested that Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga, who serves as the coordinator of the cardinals' group, wanted the Vatican to consider creating a new congregation for the laity.

Rodríguez is the archbishop of the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa. Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley is the only American serving in the cardinals' group.

While there is currently a Pontifical Council for the Laity, making such an office a congregation would give it a higher standing in the Vatican bureaucracy, making it equal to the offices like those that are responsible for enforcing church doctrine or selecting bishops around the world.

Such a congregation for the laity, Pax Romana writes, "has a great potential to engender and strengthen a common sense of mission among international associations, communities and congregations with different charisms, spiritualities and methodologies."

Proposing a global meeting of all international lay groups recognized by the Vatican, the academics also call for "greater efforts" to include the voices of laywomen in the Curia.

"The number of lay women, and in particular those who are not in consecrated life ... has not grown much

since Paul VI," they write. "International lay associations can help the curia identify qualified women with diverse experiences to share their gifts with the Church."

Pax Romana also calls for better day-to-day support of Catholic laypeople from the Vatican, suggesting a new position in the Curia akin to a lay liaison.

"More is needed than occasional thematic conferences and large-scale events like the World Youth Day," the academics write. "While these are important, special attention should be given to support the day-to-day apostolic efforts and training programs of international associations of young people, students, and young professionals."

"A liaison position or specific office within the curia ... could serve as a resource for the apostolic initiatives and movements aimed at forming responsible lay leaders of Catholic social doctrine," they state.

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