

Pope says Vatican shouldn't be 'bureaucratic customs house'

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 21, 2013 NCR Today
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In what amounts to his first 'State of the Union' speech, Pope Francis warned Dec. 21 that without a spirit of service the Vatican risks becoming no more than a 'heavy bureaucratic customs house,' and insisted that its personnel shouldn't constantly be 'inspecting and questioning.'

The pope did not roll out a specific reform plan, but laid out the basic values he believes curial personnel must have: professionalism and a dedication to service.

Francis also issued another strong call to resist gossip, calling on curia personnel to become 'conscientious objectors' to the 'unwritten law' of the Vatican, which is a temptation to gossip that's 'harmful to people, our work and our surroundings.'

Francis made the comments in the pope's annual year-end speech to the Roman Curia. The first such speech of a papacy often offers a broad vision of where the new pope wants the Vatican, and, by extension, the broader church, to move.

In December 2005, Benedict XVI delivered one of the most memorable speeches of his papacy, criticizing what he described as a 'hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture' on the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) in favor of a 'hermeneutics of reform.'

In general, the speech was taken as a rejection of more liberal readings of Vatican II and a call for recovery of church tradition, which became a dominant thrust of the Benedict years.

Francis' maiden year-end speech seems to have the same purpose, pointing to a destination without providing a detailed roadmap of how to get there.

The Vatican provided translations of the brief speech in six languages, reflecting the importance traditionally attached to it.

Francis began by thanking the personnel who work for him on a daily basis, with a special note of acknowledgment for veteran Vatican officials now heading off into retirement.

'I have such high regard for these Monsignori who are cut from the same mold as the curiales of olden times, exemplary persons,' he said.

The heart of the speech was the call for professionalism and service.

'When professionalism is lacking, there is a slow drift downwards towards mediocrity,' the pope said.

'Dossiers become full of trite and lifeless information, and incapable of opening up lofty perspectives. Then too, when the attitude is no longer one of service to the particular churches and their bishops, the structure of the

Curia turns into a ponderous, bureaucratic customs house, constantly inspecting and questioning, hindering the working of the Holy Spirit and the growth of God's people.?

The pope also added a third quality he wants curial personnel to foster, which was "holiness of life."

The speech tracks with several reform moves Francis has taken over the last nine months to promote curial reform, including what he called a "sound decentralization" in his recent document *Evangelii Gaudium*, or "Joy of the Gospel."

In April, Francis created a council of eight cardinals from around the world to serve as his primary sounding board, most of whom are either former or current leaders in their national and regional bishops' conferences. In part, the move was intended to ensure that the voices of local churches in various parts of the world are better heard in Rome.

Francis has also revised the process for the Synod of Bishops, the next meeting of which is set for October 2014 on the theme of the family. He's made it a two-stage process, so that participants can go back to the grass roots to discuss its results over the course of a year before making final recommendations to the pope.

In October, Francis began to assemble his own team in the Vatican, moving out one department head associated with a more traditional outlook, Cardinal Mauro Piacenza at the Congregation for Clergy, and moving in a new Secretary of State, Archbishop Pietro Parolin, who has a reputation for moderation and simplicity much like the pope's.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis indicated that he wants to allow bishops' conferences around the world to exercise real teaching authority. Assuming he follows through, that would amount to a repeal of a 1998 ruling under John Paul II that held conferences cannot teach authoritatively without either the unanimous agreement of all their members or the prior approval of the Vatican.

In early December, Francis also overhauled the membership of the Vatican's all-important Congregation for Bishops, the department responsible for recommending new bishops around the world. In general, those nominations were perceived to move the ideological goalposts in a moderate direction, and to give preference to figures with a reputation for a collegial working style.

Also in December, Francis asked the senior clergy of the Roman Curia to devote time to hearing confessions at the nearby Church of Santo Spirito in Sassia, in keeping with his emphasis on mercy as a core spiritual principle.

Most recently, Francis approved the hiring of two major global consulting firms, McKinsey and Company and KPMG, to overhaul the Vatican's communications operation and to promote better accounting practices.

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