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Francis makes his first mistake

by Thomas Reese

Faith and Justice

In advancing four members of the Roman Curia to the cardinalate, Pope Francis has made his first major mistake, which may ultimately undermine his attempts at reforming the Vatican.

There is not anything particularly wrong with the men being made cardinals. Three of them are clearly Francis men who were put into their positions by the pope: Pietro Parolin, secretary of state; Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary general of the Synod of Bishops; and Beniamino Stella, prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy.

The fourth Curia man Francis promoted was originally appointed by Pope Benedict XVI: Gerhard Ludwig Müller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He is not popular in the United States because he led the Vatican investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Progressive Catholics would love to see him replaced by someone more open to discussion and debate in the church.

After the Second Vatican Council, there were numerous attempts to reform the Vatican, none of which succeeded. Under Paul VI, national bishops' conferences were given more power, for example, in adapting the liturgy to local pastoral needs. But under John Paul II, the decentralization was reversed and power reverted to the Vatican. That is why we have the terrible English translation used in parishes today.

Even in the heydays of decentralization, liturgical texts still had to come to Rome for final approval. Vatican officials used this technicality to regain control of the process by simply saying "no" and telling conferences that unless they made extensive changes, the text would not be approved. It was very easy for the Vatican to take back control during the papacy of John Paul.

The lesson for today: Francis may decide to decentralize a number of things to local churches, but this can

be easily reversed in a later papacy.

Other post-Vatican II reforms of the Curia simply involved moving around boxes on the organizational chart, renaming offices and moving responsibilities from one office to another. This may improve decision-making and communications on the margins, but it is not real reform.

True reform must destroy the papal court and turn it into a civil service. As long as officials in the Curia are made archbishops and cardinals, they will act like princes and nobles rather than servants. They will see themselves as a governing elite between the pope and the bishops rather than as staff to the pope and the college of bishops.

Not making curial officials into cardinals would strengthen the hand of the pope because it is much easier to fire someone who is not an archbishop or cardinal. It would also have allowed Francis to give four more red hats to archbishops around the world.

Not making Vatican officials bishops or cardinals would also open up all sorts of positions for laypeople. For example, there is no reason a nuncio or the head of a Vatican office could not be a layperson, even a woman. But under the current system, this would be impossible.

There is still hope. If the eight cardinals from outside Rome who are advising the pope on reforming the Curia recommend not making Vatican officials cardinals, Pope Francis can initiate the reform next time. But I am not holding my breath.

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