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With reforms unclear, Francis starts possible bellwether week

by Joshua J. McElwee

Vatican City — Pope Francis began meeting Monday for the third time with a select group of eight cardinals advising him on reforming the global Catholic church, but it remains unclear just what reforms are in the offing.

The meeting of the group, known formally as the Council of Cardinals, opens a week at the Vatican that could be a bellwether for the effect of the pope's intended reforms of the central command structure for the church.

In the space of eight days, the pontiff is to:

- hear reports from three groups studying reform of the Vatican's finances;
- welcome cardinals from around the world for a special ceremony adding new members to their ranks; and
- kick off more formal preparations for an October meeting of the world's bishops that could lead to changes in the church's pastoral practices focused on family life.

Responding to questions at a press briefing Monday afternoon, Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi said the Council of Cardinals had not told him whether they made any decisions Monday morning or whether they expected to do so before their meetings wrapped up Wednesday.

Hinting at the importance of coming days, Lombardi said Monday the Council of Cardinals met with another papal commission meant to study the Vatican's economic and administrative structures, the Commission for Reference on the Organization of the Economic-Administrative Structure of the Holy See.

The spokesman said the Council of Cardinals are also expected to meet with a separate group studying reform of the Institute for the Works of Religion, known commonly as the Vatican bank.

With those meetings, the eight cardinals, at Francis' direction, could be starting to dip their hands more deeply into the Vatican's troubled financial past.

While the Vatican announced in December that the economic-administrative committee had hired the Dutch auditing firm KPMG to advise the Vatican on updating its accounting procedures, ongoing in Italy is the trial of Msgr. Nunzio Scarano, an accountant in the Vatican's finance ministry who is accused of using his Vatican bank accounts to launder money.

The cardinals' group, which includes prelates from six continents, previously met in October and December. Pope Francis announced the formation of the consultative body in April, saying it was meant to "study a project of revision" of the Vatican's bureaucracy.

The lone American in the group is Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley. Honduran Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga serves as its coordinator.

Following the meeting of the Council of Cardinals, Francis is to open Thursday a meeting of some 100 cardinals from around the world, who are converging on Rome this week for a formal ceremony, known as a consistory, to add 19 new members to their ranks.

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Francis announced the new cardinals in January, picking prelates for the honor who mainly hail from the global South, including places like Haiti, Burkina Faso and the Philippines.

Lombardi said Monday the full cardinals' meeting would open Thursday morning with a reflection on the issue of family life by Cardinal Walter Kasper, a German theologian and former head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Kasper's address to the full cardinals' group comes only a few weeks after the German bishops' conference released a blunt report showing a clear divergence between what the church teaches on marriage, sexuality and family life and what German Catholics believe.

That report, which compiled official responses from all of Germany's 27 dioceses and about 20 German Catholic organizations and institutions, was undertaken in preparation for the October meeting of the world's bishops.

That meeting, known as a synod, was announced by Francis last year to focus on issues of family life. In preparation for the event, Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary general of the Vatican's Synod of Bishops, asked bishops' conferences around the world to distribute a questionnaire on Catholics' opinions on issues like same-sex marriage, sexuality, and divorce "as widely as possible."

The Vatican office for the synod, headed by Baldisseri, is expected to meet this week and next to sift through answers from the questionnaire from around the world and to begin specific planning for the October event.

While Lombardi said Monday that questions regarding whether the choice of Kasper was an indication

that the subject of divorce and remarriage would be talked about among the cardinals were "legitimate," he also said he did not have an answer.

"There's not a secret" regarding the German bishops' survey results, the spokesman said.

Lombardi also said Cardinal-designate Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state, joined the Council of Cardinals on Monday for their discussions, but he did not know what formal role Parolin plays with the group.

It is a "communication of fact" that Parolin was present with the group, but there is no "formal communication" of how the secretary takes part in the meetings, the spokesman said.

In response to another reporter's question as to whether members of the press might expect a member of the group to brief them later in the week, Lombardi responded: "The press office is at the service of the cardinals."

During the October Council of Cardinals meeting, O'Malley met reporters during a briefing to announce the formation of a new commission in the church's central bureaucracy tasked with advising the pontiff on safeguarding children from sex abuse and working pastorally with abuse victims.

Lombardi was clear to say Monday that the separate councils advising the pope do not make decisions. The councils, he said, can make a decision only if the pope agrees.

"If not," Lombardi said, "there is not a decision."

In other words, as Francis begins a possible bellwether week, all reforms remain his prerogative.

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