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Francis' cardinal council focusing on financial reform, laity

by Joshua J. McElwee

Vatican City — While the deliberations of the select group of eight cardinals advising Pope Francis on reforming the governance of the Catholic church remain secret, Tuesday gave several peeks into the shape and contour of the discussions.

Financial reform is topping the agenda, but laity and family life are also points of discussion.

The chief concern in this round of meetings, according to the Vatican: how to make sure the financial structures of the church are "at the service ... of the world and not at the operational service of the Vatican itself."

Speaking during a briefing with reporters Tuesday afternoon, Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi said the cardinals' group, known formally as the Council of Cardinals, spent the morning meeting with a special commission reviewing the practices of the Institute for the Works of Religion, known commonly as the Vatican bank.

The bank, which is privately held and does not manage the Vatican's budget, has been the source of controversy for years because of reports of vague withdrawals and deposits made to and by the organization.

But like on other subjects regarding the work of the cardinals' group, Lombardi said Tuesday no specific decisions were made regarding the bank.

The cardinals, Lombardi said, "mentioned a few possible directions regarding the possible renewal of the institute." The cardinals' group, he added, is evaluating the bank in light of the other financial entities

controlled by the Vatican, but "no decisions were made with regard to their relationship."

While Vatican officials Tuesday weren't giving details on decisions of the cardinals' commission, its coordinator spoke at length about its work Monday.

Speaking in an interview with the French Catholic daily *La Croix*, Honduran Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga said while he did not know how his group would specifically handle the bank, "it is better to treat a patient than raise the dead."

Apparently referring to reports that Francis may decide to abolish the bank altogether, Rodríguez Maradiaga seemed to reply that would not be the way forward, continuing: "Cutting off an arm, I think, will be the kind of surgery that we avoid."

Instead, Rodríguez Maradiaga replied that his group may decide to put one person in charge of the various financial entities of the Vatican, which include: the bank; the governorate of the Vatican City State, which oversees the running of the Vatican itself; and the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See, which essentially oversees the Vatican's budget.

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"That's part of the discussion between us, [that] it might be an idea that one person is responsible for everything" regarding the Vatican's finances, Rodríguez Maradiaga said.

Rodríguez Maradiaga serves as the coordinator of the cardinals' group, which includes prelates from six of the seven continents and 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. Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley is the only cardinal in the group from the United States.

Responding to questions Tuesday about Rodríguez Maradiaga's remarks, Lombardi said the cardinal was raising things his group "had spoken about" and "meant to confirm in a way the ideas that have come out."

During the Council of Cardinals' first meeting in October, Lombardi said they made a plan to review each of the Vatican's congregations and councils "one by one." The spokesman said Tuesday they hadn't yet finished reviewing the nine congregations, let alone begun reviewing the 12 councils.

"What I've sensed is that they're working hard and intensively and it really is clear that they want to get to a conclusion and a result," he said.

"But to know how long it will take and when this worked would be concluded I would really be careful in giving any time frame."

In his interview, Rodríguez also raised an idea he has spoken of previously: that the pope create a congregation at the Vatican dedicated solely to the laity.

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 responsible for enforcing church doctrine or selecting bishops around the world.

"This is surely necessary for the church," Rodríguez Maradiaga said. "We have a congregation for bishops, for religious life, for clergy and only a pontifical council for the laity that forms the majority of the church. We cannot continue like this."

And inside that new congregation, the cardinal said, should be a new pontifical council for the family, directed by a married couple.

"Why not?" Rodríguez Maradiaga asked in his interview. "It would be a great sign."

"I can tell you that the spirit pushes in this direction," he said. "Every day more and more laymen and women take their responsibility of leaders in the church."

Following his meetings with the Council of Cardinals, Francis is to begin meeting with some 150 cardinals from around the world Thursday, who are converging on Rome this week for a formal ceremony, known as a consistory, to add 19 new members to their ranks.

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.

On Monday, Lombardi said the full cardinals' meeting Thursday would open 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 an October meeting of the world's bishops, known as a synod.

The Vatican office for the synod is to host meetings next week among its 15-member planning council to formally prepare for the October event.

Responding to a question Tuesday on whether the cardinals meeting this week could in essence co-opt the synod by determining its agenda, Lombardi said consistories "have no real deliberative power, no decision making power."

"They can't decide anything," he continued. "They are just a space in which the cardinals very freely express their ideas, their thoughts, even in a very disorganized way."

The synod, however, "is organized with an agenda, with a working plan, with few proposals that have been selected," Lombardi said.

Whether the deliberations from Thursday's and Friday's meetings between the cardinals will play a direct role in October's synod is for the synod members to decide, Lombardi said.

"Obviously, between the consistory and the synod, there has to be a connection," he said. "If they will want to use other tools to remember what has been said, or if the synod will listen to the [cardinals'] interventions ... that's up to them."

Lombardi also said Cardinal-designate Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state, again joined the council in its discussions Tuesday.

Responding to a question about whether Parolin is only listening during the meetings or speaking too, Lombardi said the secretary "speaks openly" and is "not less than anybody else."

While the pope has not decided to formally add Parolin to the cardinals' group, said the spokesman, "it might be that the composition of the members might change or vary" depending on what the pope decides.

[Joshua J. McElwee is *NCR* national correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

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