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Cardinals begin closed consultations on Catholic family practices

by Joshua J. McElwee

Synod on the Family

Vatican City — Pope Francis met with some 150 Catholic cardinals from around the world Thursday to launch a series of discussions that could eventually lead to changes in the church's pastoral practices regarding issues of family life.

Unclear are just what practices, if any, are on the table for discussion -- and even what exactly is being said behind the closed doors of the Vatican's New Synod Hall.

While the text of the pope's remarks opening the event, known formally as an extraordinary consistory of cardinals, has been made public, all other remarks -- including a two-hour reflection on the subject by German Cardinal Walter Kasper -- are being kept private.

"Our reflections will always present the beauty of the family and marriage, the greatness of this human reality which is so simple and yet so rich, made up of joys and hopes, of struggles and sufferings, like all of life," Pope Francis said in his opening remarks.

But, he said, they would have to go forward "without falling into casuistry," or unsound reasoning.

Walking into the meeting Thursday morning, Philippine Cardinal-designate Orlando Quevedo said people in his area of the world hope he and his peers will seek a "pastoral approach" toward handling issues like the use of contraception by Catholics.

Asian Catholics, Quevedo said to members of the press as he entered the synod hall, aren't looking for changes on specific Catholic teachings like the ban on use of artificial contraception, but "they want to see

a kind of pastoral approach."

Quevedo, who heads the Philippines' Cotabato archdiocese, said Asians seek a "pastoral approach in terms of ... kindness that the church can provide."

Approximately 185 cardinals are expected in Rome by Saturday, when Francis will formally induct Quevedo and 18 others into their ranks. Before that formal ceremony, the cardinals are meeting together Thursday and Friday.

Before the opening of the consistory Thursday, Francis stood among the cardinals entering the hall, greeting most face-to-face.

Francis called on them to "deepen the theology of the family and pastoral care we must implement under present conditions."

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Speaking for just over three minutes and almost entirely from a prepared text, the pope called the family the "fundamental cell of society" that is "a reflection in the world of God, one and triune."

"The family today is despised, maltreated," he continued. "What is asked of us is to recognize what is beautiful, true and good -- to form a family, to be a family today, as it is essential for the life of this world, for the future of humanity."

"We are called to put forth the light of God's plan for the family and help spouses live it with joy in their lives, accompanying them in many difficulties with pastoral care that is intelligent, courageous, and full of love."

Reporters were escorted out of the hall Thursday after Francis' opening and before Kasper's remarks.

Speaking at a briefing later in the day, Lombardi said Kasper spoke for about two hours, focusing on several different areas, including: the theological idea of a "domestic church" made by the family; the scope of the family in the order of creation; and specific difficulties faced around the world by women and mothers.

Lombardi said the theologian also touched on the topic of Catholics who are divorced and remarried, but only in a broad way. Lombardi, reading from Kasper's concluding sentences, said the cardinal had called for a church that is "on a journey with the people."

Following Kasper's talk, Lombardi said, there was time for two short comments, known as interventions, by others in the room. The texts of all talks, however, will not be published -- they are "for the use of the fathers" and their work is "for this consistory," Lombardi said.

Following the cardinals' meeting this week, the Vatican office for the Synod of Bishops is to host a separate meeting Monday among its 15-member planning council to formally prepare for an October meeting of the world's bishops, also focused on the church's pastoral practices regarding issues of family life.

Called by Pope Francis last year, the Oct. 5-19 Synod of Bishops will focus on the theme "Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization."

In the fall, the synod office, led by Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, sent a 40-question questionnaire to individual bishops around the world, asking them to distribute the questions "as widely as possible."

Among the topics: the Catholic teaching prohibiting the use of artificial contraception, the possibility of a divorced Catholic to remarry or receive Communion, and the number of young people choosing to live together before marrying.

On Monday, the the synod council is expected to begin reviewing the responses to the questionnaire, said to be in the tens of thousands of pages, in preparation for the October event.

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

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