

Changing needs, changing focus: Councils advise, encourage church

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VATICAN CITY - The Roman Curia did not have any “pontifical councils” until 1967, but since then they have become a popular structure for focusing attention on practical areas of life in the church and the world.

As Pope Francis and his international Council of Cardinals continue their review of the structure of the Roman Curia and discuss ways to reform it, the amalgamation of several councils is a recurring hypothesis.

For example, news reports repeatedly surmise the formation of a new Congregation for Laity, incorporating the Pontifical Council for the Laity and the Pontifical Council for the Family. Another popular idea is the combining of the pontifical councils for Justice and Peace, Cor Unum and Migrants and Travelers, since their areas of focus are closely related and often overlap.

Unlike congregations, which have a cardinal as prefect, the pontifical councils can have either a cardinal or an archbishop as president.

Currently, there are 12 pontifical councils:

1. Pontifical Council for the Laity

Established on an experimental basis by Pope Paul VI in 1967, the council became permanent in 1976. It is charged with promoting the role of laity within the church and grants official recognition to international associations of Catholic laity.

2. Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity

Pope John XXIII established the Secretariat for the Union of Christians in 1960 as one of the commissions charged with preparations for the Second Vatican Council. Recognizing the unique relationship between Christians and Jews, a section for relations with Jews was added in 1974. The council coordinates the Catholic Church’s ecumenical relationships and its official theological dialogue with other Christians.

3. Pontifical Council for the Family

Pope Paul established a Committee for the Family in 1973, and St. John Paul II made it a pontifical council in 1981 to promote the pastoral care of families and church teaching on family life.

4. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace

Like the Pontifical Council for the Laity, the council for justice and peace was

established on an experimental basis by Pope Paul in 1967 and made permanent in 1976. Its task is to study and promote the social teaching of the church and to monitor the status of justice, peace, human rights and development around the world.

5. Pontifical Council Cor Unum

Instituted by Pope Paul in 1971, the council promotes and coordinates Catholic charitable giving as well as cooperation with international aid agencies; it also distributes emergency aid donations from the pope in response to disasters.

6. Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers

Established as a pontifical commission in 1970 by Pope Paul, it traces its roots to a council for emigration set up by Pope Pius XII soon after World War II. Its current responsibilities include the promotion of pastoral care for migrants, refugees, seafarers, Gypsies, circus workers, foreign students and all those whose lives are marked by frequent moves.

7. Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry

St. John Paul set up a commission for health care ministry in 1985 and made it a council in 1988. It promotes the pastoral care of the sick, the spiritual and ethical education of health care workers and education throughout the church on the Catholic attitude toward illness and death.

8. Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts

Established by Pope Benedict XV in 1917 to ensure the authentic interpretation of the Code of Canon Law he promulgated that year, it became a commission for the revision of canon law in 1963. In 1967 Pope Paul also entrusted to it the interpretation of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council. After St. John Paul promulgated a new Code of Canon Law in 1983, the commission became the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts. After the publication of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches in 1990, the council became responsible for issuing authoritative responses to questions about that as well. In addition, the council helps draft legislative texts for the pope, who is the church's supreme legislator.

9. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

The Secretariat for Non-Christians was established by Pope Paul in 1964 to promote friendly relations with the world's major religions. With "Pastor Bonus," St. John Paul changed its name and made it a pontifical council. For a period in 2006-07, Pope Benedict XVI placed the council for interreligious dialogue and the council for culture under the guidance of the same president, leading to speculation that he was downgrading the importance of the council. However, it remained autonomous and since 2007 has been led by its own president, currently French Cardinal Jean-Louis

Tauran.

10. Pontifical Council for Culture

The Pontifical Council for Culture was established by St. John Paul in 1982 to promote dialogue with different cultures and the world of culture - literature, art and music. St. John Paul also merged into the council the Secretariat for Non-Believers, established by Pope Paul in 1965 to begin a conversation with thinkers who do not believe in God.

11. Pontifical Council for Social Communications

Pope Paul gave created the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications in 1964. Its remote roots go back to the office Pope Pius XII set up in 1948 for the “study and ecclesiastical evaluation of films on religious or moral subjects.” In 1952 it became the Pontifical Commission for Cinema and in 1954 was renamed the Pontifical Commission for the Cinema, Radio and Television. The office studies changes in communications technology, makes recommendations for ethical standards in the media and promotes the church’s use of media in proclaiming the Gospel and serving humanity. It also developed the PopeApp for mobile devices and administers the Vatican’s news aggregator, www.news.va.

12. Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization

Pope Benedict established the council in 2010 to promote a renewal of the faith and the Catholic Church in countries where Christianity was established long ago, but its vitality has been waning. In addition to having responsibility for catechesis, the council is charged with studying how modern means of communication can be used to promote evangelization.

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