

Pope Francis wants 'absolute transparency' as he pushes Vatican reform

by [David Gibson](#)

February 12, 2015

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Francis called for a Vatican that operates with “absolute transparency” as he gathered more than 165 cardinals in Rome for high-level meetings aimed at tackling one of the toughest challenges of his reformist papacy: overhauling the dysfunctional bureaucracy of the Roman Curia.

The goal, Francis told a lecture hall filled with the “princes of the church,” is to encourage “greater harmony” among the different church offices in a bid to foster “absolute transparency that builds authentic ... collegiality.”

“Reform is not an end in itself, but a means of bearing a powerful Christian witness,” Francis said.

That was a nod to the scandals that overshadowed the waning years of Benedict XVI's papacy and undermined the Vatican's credibility with the public and the dismayed churchmen who had to deal with the fallout.

The two-day gathering with the cardinals—including most of the 20 new appointees who will be officially elevated by the pope on Saturday—comes almost two years to the day after Benedict stunned the world by announcing that he would become the first pope in nearly 600 years to resign from office.

Benedict's retirement was spurred in part by the various crises and infighting that erupted on his watch, and his inability to deal with them as he grew older and more infirm.

As Francis noted in his brief remarks on Thursday (February 12), overhauling the Vatican bureaucracy—and making it more accountable to the world's bishops, rather than the Curia giving orders—was a priority that emerged from closed-door discussions that preceded the conclave of March 2013 that elected Cardinal Jorge

Bergoglio of Buenos Aires as pope.

Francis quickly took steps to start the process, and raised great hopes. But the task is proving difficult even for Francis, as it has for popes before him.

There is still no detailed proposal for reorganizing the byzantine structure of the Roman Curia, which has nine influential and largely autonomous “congregations” and a dozen “councils” of lesser rank.

The cardinals will hear only the outlines of some of the major ideas that have emerged, such as combining many offices under two major departments, one dealing with issues of justice and charity, the other with issues such as the family and the laity.

The cardinals will also hear updates on efforts to streamline the Vatican’s multipronged media operations, and they will be briefed on the progress of a major new initiative, the papal commission to combat child abuse and deal with the clergy sex scandal.

The effort to clean up the Vatican bank and the tangled finances of the Holy See is another priority but also emblematic of the challenges Francis faces.

One of the cardinals charged by the pope with reforming the Vatican’s economic system said this week that he and the financial experts working with the cardinals are meeting some resistance from curial offices as the reformers try to install basic methods of oversight and accountability.

“It’s a culture shock to have to report to somebody other than themselves,” Cardinal Wilfrid Napier of South Africa told Catholic News Service.

Napier said that he believes Francis and his team still have the support of a majority of the cardinals when it comes to reform, but he told CNS that “those shouting the loudest” for reform before the 2013 conclave now seem less enthusiastic.

“It’s one thing to say it needs to be done, another to do it,” he said.

The pope himself seems to recognize that it’s an uphill battle. Last Christmas he delivered a sharp rebuke to curial officials who would impede reforms, and he again stressed that “reaching this goal (of reform) is not easy” in his remarks on Thursday. “It will take time, determination and, above all, the collaboration of all.”