

Five thoughts on the pope's new 'G8'



A Vatican announcement yesterday that Francis has named eight cardinals to advise him on governance represents the first concrete step towards the reform that was so much in the air during the run-up to the conclave that propelled a Latin American outsider to the papacy.

Twenty-four hours later, five points seem most noteworthy about the “G8” that will likely be the new pope’s most important sounding board.

1. A cabinet, not a blue-ribbon commission

In some early reporting, the mission of this body has been described as helping Francis to reform the Roman Curia. Yet reading yesterday’s announcement, that’s not what it says. The key line states that Francis has assembled this group “to advise him in the government of the universal church”, and only then “to study a plan for revising the Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Curia, Pastor Bonus.”

In other words, curial reform is only the second task. The first is to advise the pope on decisions about the universal church, meaning there’s almost nothing that falls outside its purview.

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To invoke parallels from secular governments, this isn’t a blue-ribbon commission assembled to

handle a single task, like reforming Social Security or recommending military base closings. This is more akin to a cabinet, a body to advise the chief executive on almost everything that comes across his desk.

2. Not ‘yes’ men

Looking at the list of eight cardinals Francis picked, they’re strong personalities rather than ‘yes’ men inclined simply to tell the pope what he wants to hear.

Cardinal George Pell of Sydney may be a solid doctrinal conservative, but during the pre-conclave period no one was more outspoken about dysfunction in Vatican management. He famously said of the Benedict years, “Governance is done by most of the people around the pope, and that wasn’t always done brilliantly.”

Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga has crossed swords with Vatican potentates, including a stand-off with his fellow Salesian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone regarding an overhaul of Caritas Internationalis. Cardinal Sean O’Malley of Boston joined Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna in 2010 in criticizing Cardinal Angelo Sodano for referring to criticism of the church’s record on sex abuse as “petty gossip.”

Over the years, both Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya of the DRC and Cardinal Oswald Gracias of India have argued for greater latitude for both local churches and regional conferences of bishops.

This background suggests that Francis has turned to prelates likely to give him real advice, not just a rubber stamp.

3. Collegial on multiple levels

The decision to assemble this group of advisors comes off as an act of collegiality, meaning shared authority, on at least three levels.

First and most obviously, by placing a group of leaders from dioceses around the world at the top of the food chain, it's a way of saying that the Vatican must be accountable to the local churches rather than it always being the other way around. In that sense, this is a way of implementing the call for greater collegiality that goes all the way back to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Second, this group is clearly designed to be geographically representative, including at least one cardinal from each continent. When Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone called these cardinals early last week on behalf of the pope to ask if they would accept the appointment, some were explicitly told they were being asked to serve as the representative of their geographic region.

Third, this group includes the current president of the Commission of Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich) and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (Gracias), as well as past presidents of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (Monsengwo) and the Episcopal Council of Latin America (Cardinal Francisco Javier Errázuriz Ossa of Chile).

Those picks were unlikely to have been accidents. They suggest a revitalization of the role of bishops' conferences, both nationally and regionally, under Francis.

4. Clipped wings for the Secretariat of State

Since the election of the new pope, there has been a steady drumbeat of speculation in Rome about whom he might pick as the next Secretary of State, with that choice usually styled as the key first test of how serious Francis may be about reform.

In light of yesterday's announcement, however, it now seems less critical who takes over from Bertone, because the role of the Secretariat of State seems destined to be diminished under Francis. Rather than being the über-dicastery where all the important decisions about church governance are made, it may function more like a support staff to the pope and his body of eight advisors.

Even without the new group, the Secretary of State likely would have been less central. Everything about the administrative style of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Buenos Aires suggests he prefers to take the important decisions directly in hand, rather than relying on a “right arm.” The creation of the “G8”, however, provides another firebreak between Francis and over-dependence on the usual bureaucratic structures.

Italian journalist Paolo Rodari was the first to break the story of the pope’s new cabinet, based on comments Francis made on Friday to a group of bishops from Tuscany. Here’s how Rodari described the implications for the Secretariat of State: “It will continue to exist, but it will be substantially weakened.”

5. Role reversals for Rodriguez Maradiaga and O’Malley

There’s nothing like the election of a new pope to reshuffle the deck in the church in terms of who’s up and who’s down, and the choice of Francis clearly illustrates that principle for two of the cardinals named to this “G8”: Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras and O’Malley of Boston.

Not so long ago, the consensus among church-watchers was that Rodriguez Maradiaga was basically dead in the water. He was seen as too center-left for many in the Vatican, especially on matters of the economy and social justice; he stumbled in 2002 with some off-key comments about the sexual abuse crisis; some believed he mishandled the 2009 coup in Honduras; and he also lost an internal Vatican debate in 2011 over Caritas.

Now, however, he’s widely perceived as one of the kingmakers behind the election of Pope Francis, and has been asked to serve as the coordinator of this new group of eight cardinals. It’s possible that before long, the 70-year-old Rodriguez Maradiaga will be seen as the second most powerful figure in the church after the pope himself.

As for O’Malley, he’s the American cardinal the new pope knows the best. Aside from the fact that he speaks fluent Spanish, he was a house guest of Bergoglio in Buenos Aires a couple of years ago, and they have many friends in common up and down the church in Latin America.

Moreover, he's also the American cardinal most obviously in sync with the spirit of the new pope. They both come out of religious life (Bergoglio is a Jesuit, O'Malley a Capuchin), and both are clearly devoted to the example of Francis of Assisi. Consider the adjectives typically used to describe the new pope: simple, humble, close to the people. In the States, the same things have long been said about O'Malley.

Back in November 2004, O'Malley famously confessed that "at times I ask God to call me home and let someone else finish this job," suggesting he was overwhelmed by the demands of governance in Boston.

Over time O'Malley got his legs under him, and now he seems poised to become under this pope what Cardinal John O'Connor was under John Paul II, and what Cardinal Timothy Dolan was under Benedict: the pontiff's go-to guy not just in the United States, but North America and much of the English-speaking world.

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