

Pope Francis begins the most important year of his pontificate

Curia reform, new cardinals and trips to unexpected places will shape pope's 2020

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When the history of Pope Francis' time as Bishop of Rome is finally written, there is a good chance that the Year of Our Lord 2020 will be recorded as the most important of his entire pontificate.

Some are wondering whether it may actually be his last.

The pope's recent decisions to "retire" the powerful Italian churchman Angelo Sodano as dean of the College of Cardinals and to make Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of the Philippines head one of the most powerful Vatican offices – Propaganda Fide – are being read as signs that Francis is beginning to prepare for the election of his successor on the Chair of Peter.

The 83-year-old Jesuit pope will also be issuing two major documents in 2020, and probably a few others. He'll continue to travel the globe, possibly going to places where his predecessors had hoped to visit but were denied entry. And there's no doubt he will add more men to the illustrious red-hatted group from which will emerge the next Bishop of Rome.

So any way one looks at this new calendar year, it will almost certainly prove to be pivotal.

The Synod paves the way to reform

Pope Francis is to publish at least two extremely important documents already in the initial weeks of 2020.

The first of these texts is an apostolic exhortation on last October's special assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region. Francis has already hinted that he will endorse a number of changes in pastoral practice that the Synod participants proposed to him.

One of these is the priestly ordination of the *viri probati* (married men of proven virtue), specifically those who are already permanent deacons. Another is the establishment of a new papal commission to study the possibility of instituting the diaconate and other ministries for women. And a third is the compilation of a

new liturgical rite to incorporate cultural elements particular to the native peoples of the Amazon.

This highly anticipated post-synodal apostolic exhortation is likely to open up other avenues for reform, as well. So its importance should not be underestimated.

As argued before, the Oct. 6-27 Synod [gathering](#) at the Vatican marked a turning point for the emergence of a truly global Church.

It is one that is still struggling to break free from residual elements from the Tridentine era (especially clericalism) that continue to be an obstacle to the full implementation of the teachings and vision of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Observers believe the forthcoming exhortation could be published as early as mid- to late-January.

Praedicate Evangelium

The second major document that Pope Francis will be issuing in 2020 is the constitution on the reformed structure and role of the Church's central offices at the Vatican, known as the Roman Curia.

The final draft of the constitution, which has been named *Praedicate Evangelium*, is currently being tidied up after the inclusion of suggestions submitted by bishop conferences, other Church leaders and theologians. The finished product is likely to contain items that were never part of the earlier drafts that the (formerly C9, now C6) Council of Cardinals compiled in consultation with Curia officials.

Almost everyone agrees that reforming the Roman Curia has been one of the major projects and objectives of Francis' pontificate. The Argentine pope has slowly and patiently directed the [process of reform](#). And in an important address just before Christmas to members of the Curia, he said:

"In discussing a change that is grounded mainly in fidelity to the *depositum fidei* and the Tradition, today I would like to speak once more of the implementation of the reform of the Roman Curia and to reaffirm that this reform has never presumed to act as if nothing had preceded it.

"On the contrary, an effort was made to enhance the good elements deriving from the complex history of the Curia.

"There is a need to respect history in order to build a future that has solid roots and can thus prove fruitful.

"Appealing to memory is not the same as being anchored in self-preservation, but instead to evoke the life and vitality of an ongoing process.

"Memory is not static, but dynamic. By its very nature, it implies movement. Nor is tradition static; it too is dynamic, as that great man [Gustav Mahler, taking up a metaphor used by Jean Jaurès] used to say: tradition is the guarantee of the future and not a container of ashes."

Some Vatican watchers are saying *Praedicate Evangelium* will be released on Feb. 22, the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter. But no matter when it is finally published, the new constitution on the Roman Curia will be the most significant act of governance to date in this pontificate.

Fresh leadership at home and abroad

The constitution will be followed, eventually, with the publication of a new set of statutes and regulation for the daily operation of Vatican offices. And, most noticeably, it will be marked by a major and widespread leadership shake-up.

Nine cardinals who currently head key Vatican offices are already beyond the normal retirement age of 75 and a tenth, who recently completed five years in post, will reach the resignation age in June. It is expected that they will all be replaced at some point not too long after *Praedicate Evangelium* is published.

Here are their names and the offices of the upcoming retiring cardinals: Marc Ouellet (Bishops), Giuseppe Versaldi (Education), Beniamino Stella (Clergy), Luis

Ladaria (Doctrine of the Faith), Leonardo Sandri (Eastern Churches), Mauro Piacenza (Apostolic Penitentiary), Gianfranco Ravasi (Culture), Angelo Comastri (Archpriest of St. Peter's Basilica), Giuseppe Bertello (Governor of Vatican City State) and Robert Sarah (Divine Worship).

Pope Francis will also make some key appointment to a number of leading dioceses around the world. The archdioceses of Manila (Philippines), Atlanta (USA) and Caracas (Venezuela) – for instance – are currently vacant.

And men who are already past retirement age – 18 of them cardinals – continue to lead other important sees. And, beginning with Vienna's Christoph Schönborn in a few weeks time, nine more cardinals will turn 75 over the course of 2020.

While the pope will ask some of them to continue in their ministry for another year or so, he is expected replace others. It would behoove him to seize the opportunity these anniversaries offer for making a change of leadership.

New cardinals and the rule of the next conclave

There are now 124 cardinals under the age of 80 and eligible to participate in a conclave to elect the next pope. That is four more than the 120 ceiling set by Paul VI and confirmed by Francis' most recent predecessors.

Should there be no deaths among the electors, their number will not return to 120 until next November 12 when Cardinal Donald Wuerl, retired Archbishop of Washington, marks his 80th birthday.

The fact that other cardinal-electors do not begin to "age out" until March 2021 (five more will reach 80 from then until Nov. 2021), would suggest that there will be no consistory during 2020. But, in fact, that is not a sure bet.

Pope Francis has yet to issue updated legislation and norms to be followed once the Apostolic See is vacant and a new Bishop of Rome is to be elected. The need for an update in the form of an apostolic constitution is urgent since there are currently no norms or protocols for the resignation of a pope.

Additionally, certain changes forthcoming in the structure and functions of the Roman Curia will also have to be included in the new constitution. One of them will likely concern the Apostolic Camerlengo, the official who serves as caretaker administrator when the Apostolic See is vacant.

The pope freely appoints the Camerlengo (currently Cardinal Kevin Farrell). But in the draft of *Praedicate Evangelium*, it is stated that the Camerlengo is "an office that is assumed by the cardinal who is coordinator of the Council for the Economy".

That man in that job right now is Cardinal Reinhard Marx, the Archbishop of Munich and member of pope's C6 advisory body.

Francis also has the freedom to change the number of cardinal-electors, as other popes have done over the centuries, since the College of Cardinals is of purely human invention. The question is whether this pope will actually do so.

Even if he does not, there is nothing to stop him from exceeding the limit once more, just as John Paul II did on a few other occasions.

Flying the friendly and not-so-friendly skies

The late Polish pope was known as a globetrotter, making more than 100 pastoral journeys to some 129 different countries in his nearly 27 years as Bishop of Rome.

By contrast, Francis has made 32 foreign trips, visiting almost 50 countries in his nearly seven-years-long pontificate. In 2015 the Argentine pope was the first ever to visit an active war zone (Central African Republic) and last year he was the first pope in modern history to visit the Arabian Peninsula (United Arab Emirates).

There are two other countries Francis is longing to visit, both of which eluded John Paul. They are China and Russia. Perhaps 2020 will be the year that a Roman Pontiff will finally be able to travel to these long coveted destinations.

A momentous year ahead

Pope Francis began this New Year by apologizing for losing his patience. It is perhaps an auspicious sign.

First of all, because it showed that the pope has the humility to publicly admit his faults and say he's sorry. But, secondly, it showed that, beneath a seemingly unguarded display of irritation, there is also a sense of urgency and restlessness within Francis.

That may be very good news for those who have been eagerly waiting concrete structural reforms to match the change of the mentality and ethos the Argentine pope has so effectively brought to the Church.

No one can read the future, but the Year of Our Lord 2020 looks like it could be one of the most crucial and important for the recent history of Roman Catholicism.