

Pope Francis calls for flexibility, patience as he opens talks on church teaching

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Francis on Thursday (Feb. 20) opened a major two-day meeting on the church's approach to the complexities of modern family life, telling the world's Catholic cardinals that the church needs a "pastoral" approach that is "intelligent, courageous and full of love" and not focused on abstract arguments.

In brief introductory remarks released by the Vatican, Francis pushed the closed-door summit of about 150 cardinals to "deepen the theology of the family and discern the pastoral practices which our present situation requires."

He asked that they do so "thoughtfully" and by keeping the focus on "the beauty of family and marriage" while at the same time showing that the church is ready to help spouses "amid so many difficulties." Francis added the phrase "intelligent, courageous and full of love" extemporaneously.

Francis summoned the cardinals to Rome for a weekend of ceremonies at which the pope will appoint his first batch of 19 "princes of the church," as cardinals are often called.

But he asked them to arrive early so that they could spend time discussing one of Francis' signature themes: shifting the church's approach on controversial topics like divorce and remarriage, cohabitation, gay marriage and contraception.

Those issues will also be the focus of two larger and longer meetings of bishops at the Vatican this fall and in 2015.

“The pope has opened a dialogue, he’s not decided anything yet and now he’ll let us discuss,” Cardinal Walter Kasper, a German theologian who is a favorite of Francis, told Reuters on Thursday.

Kasper said the talks were not about changing doctrine or watering down traditional marriage—“that’s not possible,” he said. But “it’s a question of how to apply (church teaching to) the concrete, difficult, complex situation.”

Francis tapped Kasper to open the meetings with an address that would set the stage for the talks. Kasper—a onetime sparring partner of another German cardinal, Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Benedict XVI—delivered a two-hour talk that centered on marriage and took up most of the morning’s session.

Kasper has pushed for relaxing the ban against Communion for Catholics who have divorced and remarried without an annulment; as a bishop in Germany in the 1990s, he tried to institute a policy that would allow divorced and remarried Catholics to receive Communion in certain circumstances. The plan was rejected by the Vatican’s doctrinal office, then headed by Ratzinger.

In his talk on Thursday, Kasper did not offer any specific proposals, but repeatedly stressed the importance of pastoral flexibility and realism in dealing with people in challenging or unusual family situations.

The Rev. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican’s chief spokesman, said Kasper’s talk would remain private but he provided reporters with an overview of the address.

“Our efforts are not about restating that the doctrine of the church is thus and so,” Lombardi said in summarizing Kasper’s remarks. “Our efforts are about returning to the beginning of the doctrine itself, which is the gospel.”

Lombardi described Kasper’s talk as “in great harmony” with Francis’ views, stressing the importance of accompanying people in difficult circumstances and the need for patience in helping them.

Even before he was elected pope last March, Francis—then Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, archbishop of Buenos Aires—blasted priests who “hijacked” the sacraments and refused to baptize the children of unwed mothers. He called such clerics “hypocrites” who “drive God’s people away from salvation.”

After his election, Francis continued to make the point, telling a pregnant single woman that he would baptize her baby if she couldn't find another priest to do it, and baptizing—in the storied Sistine Chapel—the baby of a couple who were married civilly but not in the church.

In other venues Francis has also repeatedly stressed the priority of preaching God's mercy rather than focusing on the details of doctrine and church rules. That, in turn, has led some to wonder if he was signaling a possible change in some teachings.

But Vatican insiders say the pope prefers to try to change the church's approach rather than start a civil war over doctrine that would distract from the church's mission to the poor and marginalized.

That doesn't mean the shift toward mercy and away from finger-wagging is sitting well with all church leaders. Disagreements were expected as each of the cardinals gets a chance to weigh in with their own views.

"Everybody will have a chance to yell about something," one cardinal quipped after the first day's sessions.