

THE APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION
“PREACH THE GOSPEL”
(*PRAEDICATE EVANGELIUM*)

The Apostolic Constitution
“Preach the Gospel”
Praedicate Evangelium

With an Appraisal of Francis’s Reform
of the Roman Curia
by Massimo Faggioli



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Historical-Theological Introduction

The apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* on the reform of the Roman Curia, promulgated by Pope Francis on March 19, 2022, is one of the most important documents of his pontificate. The work of drafting and finalizing this constitution absorbed the activities of the pope's newly created Council of Cardinals for almost nine years, since September 2013, and it embodies significant aspects of the vision of Francis for the Church. It represents one of the most important efforts to bridge the theology of Vatican II and the institutional dimension of the Church in the Vatican. This reform embodies significant breakthroughs but also visible elements of compromise with the status quo, and, at the same time, it leaves space open for an implementation of the constitution depending on the development of the "synodal process" that will be concluded in October 2023 with the assembly of the Bishops' Synod in Rome. But for Francis, synodality must continue to be part of the new way of being Church. The future of synodality will depend also on the way in which the new Roman Curia as reformed by Francis will interact, in ways that cannot be legislated upon, with the ecclesiology of "walking together" as a people of God.

1. The Roman Curia from Its Origins to the Nineteenth Century

The history of the expansion of the Roman Curia is part of the story of the expansion of papal power in the second millennium, which continues in the third millennium.¹ The central departments for the government of the Catholic Church from its center to its peripheries all over the world, the executive branch of the papacy in Rome acting in name of the pope, which has been crucial for the development of Catholicism in the second millennium (and for the government of the Papal States in central Italy, for centuries until 1870)—these institutions have all grown despite schisms and the Protestant Reformation, secularization, and the loss of temporal power. Just to mention a few examples, the centralized control of theological orthodoxy (the Holy Office), the system of taxation (civil and ecclesiastical), the foreign relations of the papacy, and the procedures governing the appointments of bishops and cardinals all depended for centuries on Rome and the institutions of the Roman Curia.

The origins of the governing body in the Church of Rome around the pope began in the fifth and sixth centuries: the priests (*presbyterium*); the personnel working in administration (*notarii, scriniarii*); diplomats (*apocrisarii*); the Roman councils (not to be confused with the ecumenical or provincial councils that were the most important decision-making

1. See Niccolò Del Re, *La Curia Romana. Lineamenti storico-giuridici* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998; 1st ed., Rome: Studium, 1941); *Dictionnaire historique de la papauté* (Paris, 1994); English-language ed. *The Papacy: An Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Philippe Levillain, English-language ed. John W. O'Malley, trans. Deborah Blaz et al., 3 vols. (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), ad vocem.

body in the Church in the first millennium). In this period there was a distinction between the responsibilities of the pope as a religious leader and his responsibilities as political leader for the city of Rome and in the newly created Papal States, thanks to a forged Roman imperial decree known as *Donatio Constantini* (The Donation of Constantine).

In the first millennium, the pope did not yet work as legislator and judge of the universal Church, and therefore the administrative apparatus was smaller. Things changed at the end of the millennium. From three key roles in the seventh century—the archpriest, the archdeacon, and the head notary—the personnel in the tenth to eleventh centuries grew to seven cardinal bishops, twenty-five cardinal priests, and seven cardinal deacons.

In the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, the administrative offices serving the pope took the official (Latin) name of “Curia.” This began a rivalry between the Curia and the ecumenical or general councils of the Church (from Lateran I in 1059 to the Council of Vienne in 1311) that saw in the Curia an obstacle to Church reform. Competition arose between the Curia and the consistories of cardinals as did a dialectic between the papacy and his own appointees, who were facing competition from the Roman nobility and the Roman families that had previously occupied the *Sacrum Palatium Lateranense*. The new institutions of the Roman Curia were the Camera and the Chapel (under Pope Urban II, 1088–1099). The most important element of the Curia after the age of Gregory VII (1073–1085) was the consistory of cardinals, who increased in importance and were drawn from the ranks of theologians and jurists. Under Pope Honorius III (1216–1227), nonresident cardinals were abolished: all of the cardinals had to reside in Rome. This

2. Between the Nineteenth Century and Vatican II

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the French Revolution, the kidnapping of the pope by Napoleon, and the emergency conclave in Venice of 1799–1800, witnessed the nadir of papal power but also the beginning of its resurrection and, with it, of a resilient Roman Curia that had to deal with the most consequential and epoch-making change in its history: the loss of the Papal States in the 1860s, culminating with the invasion of Rome, which became the capital of the new Kingdom of Italy, in 1870.

The century opened with several articulated plans for reform drafted by Curia bishops and given to Pope Pius VII in 1800—to no effect. Some of these plans propose a separation of temporal from spiritual government and a reduction in the number of Curia dicasteries. One of them, in 1814, was censored and withdrawn from public debate.

It was a time of change driven by political events. Even before the Congress of Vienna, in 1814 the new Congregation for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs was created, which became important in the international political activity of the papacy. The brief restoration of the Papal States after the invasion of Napoleon delayed the plans for a moral reform of the Roman Curia at the service of a spiritual papal power and less for temporal government.¹⁰

Under Pius IX (1846–1878) the Secretariat of State became the political headquarters of the papacy. The definitive

10. See Lajos Pasztor, “Per la storia della Segreteria di Stato nell’Ottocento. La riforma del 1816,” in *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* (AHP), vol. 5 (1965): 209–72; Pasztor, “La Congregazione degli Affari Ecclesiastici Straordinari tra il 1814 e il 1850,” in AHP, vol. 6 (1968): 191–318; Pasztor, “La Segreteria di Stato di Gregorio XVI 1833–1846,” in AHP, vol. 15 (1977): 295–332.

loss of the Papal States in 1870 made some important congregations of the Roman Curia superfluous or changed their functions. The Rota, the Signatura, and the Camera Apostolica were no longer also civil tribunals for the Papal States. This also slowly involved the administration of pontifical finances and the Dataria in the reforms of 1897–1898. New offices were created in order to assist the pope in his expanded power to appoint bishops (most importantly, but not only, in Italy).

At the end of the nineteenth century the Curia had twenty-one congregations, three tribunals, and six secretariats—a significant expansion from 1588 but on the same structure created by Pius V three centuries before. In the early twentieth century different plans for Curia reform circulated, but only in 1908 did Pius X (1903–1914) promulgate the major Curia reform made necessary by the loss of the Papal States. With the constitution *Sapienti Consilio*, Pius X reshaped the Curia into eleven congregations, three tribunals, three secretariats, and three offices. A few ancient congregations were eliminated or merged. This reform took stock of the end of the Papal States but at the same time centralized the government of the Church in the Vatican. The offices dealing with international political affairs gained more power (three sections of the Secretariat of State: extraordinary affairs, laws of states and concordats; ordinary affairs in relations with states; preparing and dispatching papal briefs). Pius X assembled a special and secret “small secretariat” around himself to deal with the most sensitive issues, especially the persecution of “modernists.”¹¹

11. Giorgio Feliciani, “La riforma della Curia romana nella costituzione apostolica ‘Sapienti consilio’ del 1908 e nel Codice di diritto canonico del 1917,” in *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée* 116, no. 1 (2004): 173–87.

5. The Reform of the Roman Curia from the Beginning of Francis's Pontificate

Pope Francis has stated in several interviews that he received from the conclave the task to regain control of the Roman Curia after the scandals that became public in 2012 and led, among other things, to the unprecedented trial and the conviction of Benedict XVI's personal steward (the so-called VatiLeaks scandal). Indeed, during the transition from Benedict XVI to Francis the perception of the Curia was significantly different from that in previous conclaves. The fact that very few people expected a new Italian or curial pope from the conclave of 2013 was a symptom of the crisis of the Curia as an institution. The quick election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, an Argentine who had never been part of the Roman Curia and had had relations with the dicasteries only as a residential bishop, confirmed that expectation.

Francis's reform of the Roman Curia had started well before the publication on March 19, 2022, of *Praedicate Evangelium*.⁴⁴ Exactly four weeks after his election, on April 13, 2013, Francis announced the creation of a Council of Cardinals, an advisory panel on Church governance made up of eight cardinals from all continents and with a significant reduction of the Italian and Curia presence.⁴⁵ In the chirograph published in September 2013, Francis detailed that the new Council of Cardinals had, among its tasks, to help

44. The *editio typica* was published in *L'Osservatore Romano* on March 30, 2022. The delay from March 19 was due to the need to correct the many typos and add updates needed by the online version.

45. The only Italian was the council's secretary, Bishop Marcello Semeraro, diocesan ordinary of Albano Laziale, until the inclusion in the "C9" of the Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, in July 2014.

him govern the universal Church and prepare a revision of John Paul II's reform of the Curia.

Officially, the beginning of the reform of the Roman Curia under Francis began with a press communiqué of October 3, 2013, on the occasion of the first meeting of the new Council of Cardinals. But already since the beginning of his pontificate, Francis introduced new institutions and new personnel for the economic-financial activities of the Holy See,⁴⁶ a stricter control by the pope personally in egregious cases of financial mismanagement by some individual bishops,⁴⁷ and a new commission for the prevention of sexual abuse in the Church.⁴⁸

Francis's work on this major project followed three distinct tracks. The first one was the drafting of the apostolic constitution itself: here the Council of Cardinals played a key role, with its forty meetings between 2013 and February 2022 and a very intense phase between 2017 and 2019. In 2017 the title of the new apostolic constitution was announced; in June 2018 Francis received the first draft; most of the five meetings of the Council of Cardinals in 2019 (C9) were dedicated to the constitution, especially in the thirty-first meeting of September 17–19, 2019.

In a long article published in the Italian Catholic magazine *Il Regno* in 2017, Archbishop Semeraro traced the steps Francis had taken so far to reform some aspects of the Curia.

46. See the motu proprio *Fidelis dispensator et prudens*, February 24, 2014.

47. Between July and October 2013, the resignations of bishops Anton Stres, Marjan Turnšek, and Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst were related to financial mismanagement.

48. The commission was created on March 22, 2014, and expanded on December 17, 2014, with new members.

POPE FRANCIS
APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION
PRAEDICATE EVANGELIUM

on the Roman Curia and Its Service
to the Church in the World

I.

PREAMBLE

1. *Praedicate Evangelium* (cf. *Mk* 16:15; *Mt* 10:7-8): this is the task that the Lord Jesus entrusted to his disciples. This mandate constitutes “the primary service that the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity in the modern world”¹ To this end, she has been called to proclaim the Gospel of the Son of God, Christ the Lord, and thereby to awaken in all peoples the hearing of faith (*Rom* 1:1-5; *Gal* 3:5). The Church carries out this command above all when, in all that she says and does, she bears witness to the mercy that she herself has graciously received. Our Lord and Master left us an example of this when he washed the feet of his disciples and declared that we shall be blessed if we do likewise (cf. *Jn* 13:14-17). “An evangelizing community thus gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives, it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others”² In this way, the people of God fulfils the commandment of the Lord who, in bidding us to proclaim the Gospel, exhorted us to care for those of our brothers and sisters who are most vulnerable, infirm and suffering.

Missionary conversion of the Church

2. The Church's "missionary conversion"³ aims to renew her as a mirror of Christ's own mission of love. The Lord's disciples are called to be "the light of the world" (*Mt* 5:14). In this way, the Church reflects the saving love of Christ, the true light of the world (cf. *Jn* 8:12). She herself becomes increasingly radiant as she brings to humanity the supernatural gift of faith as "a light for our way, guiding our journey through time". The Church is at the service of the Gospel, so that "this light of faith . . . can grow and illumine the present, becoming a star to brighten the horizon of our journey at a time when mankind is particularly in need of light".⁴

3. The reform of the Roman Curia is to be viewed in the context of the Church's missionary nature. The desire for reform was urgently felt in the sixteenth century, leading to the Apostolic Constitution *Immensa Aeterni Dei* of Sixtus V (1588), and in the twentieth century, leading to the Apostolic Constitution *Sapienti Consilio* of Pius X (1908). Following the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI, with explicit reference to the desire expressed by the Council Fathers,⁵ called for and carried out a reform of the Curia with the Apostolic Constitution *Regimini Ecclesiae Universae* (1967). Subsequently, in 1988, John Paul II promulgated the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, with the aim of further promoting communion within the Church's overall structures.

In continuity with these two recent reforms, and with appreciation for the longstanding, generous and competent service to the Roman Pontiff and the universal Church provided by so many members of the Curia, this new Apostolic Constitution seeks to attune its present-day activity more

effectively to the path of evangelization that the Church, especially in our time, has taken.

The Church: a mystery of communion

4. The reform of the Roman Curia demands attention to, and appreciation for, yet another aspect of the mystery of the Church. In her, mission and communion are so closely united that we can say that the purpose of mission is precisely that of “making everyone know and live the ‘new’ communion that the Son of God made man has introduced into the history of the world”.⁶

This life of communion makes the Church *synodal*; a Church marked by reciprocal listening, “whereby everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth (cf. *Jn* 14:17), in order to know what he says to the Churches (cf. *Rev* 2:7)”.⁷ This synodal nature of the Church is to be understood as “the journeying together of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord”.⁸ It has to do with the mission of the Church and the communion that is in service to that mission and is itself missionary.

The renewal of the Church, and consequently of the Roman Curia, cannot fail to reflect this basic reciprocity, so that the community of believers can approximate as much as possible the missionary communion experienced by the Apostles with the Lord during his earthly life (cf. *Mk* 3:14) and, after Pentecost, by the first community of Jerusalem, guided by the Holy Spirit (cf. *Acts* 2:42).

Service of the Primacy and of the College of Bishops

5. Outstanding among these gifts bestowed by the Spirit for the service of humanity is that of the Apostles, whom the Lord chose and established as a stable group (*coetus*) over whom he set Peter, chosen from among them, as their head.⁹ He entrusted to the Apostles a mission that will endure until the end of time. For this reason, they took care to appoint successors,¹⁰ so that, just as Peter and the other Apostles constituted, by the will of the Lord, one apostolic college, so today, in the Church, as a hierarchically organized society,¹¹ the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter, and the Bishops, the successors of the Apostles, are joined together in a single episcopal body, to which Bishops belong in virtue of sacramental consecration and by hierarchical communion with the head of the college and its members, that is, with the college itself.¹²

6. As the Second Vatican Council teaches: "Collegial unity is also apparent in the mutual relations of individual Bishops to particular dioceses and to the universal Church. The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of unity both of the Bishops and of the whole company of the faithful. Individual Bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches, which are modelled on the universal Church; it is in and from these that the one and unique Catholic Church exists. For that reason, each Bishop represents his own Church, whereas all of them together with the Pope represent the whole Church in a bond of peace love and unity".¹³

7. It must be emphasized that, by God's providence, over the course of time various Churches were founded in different

places by the Apostles and by their successors, and have come together in diverse groupings, chiefly the ancient patriarchal Churches. The emergence of Episcopal Conferences in the Latin Church represents one of the more recent forms in which the *communio Episcoporum* has found expression in service to the *communio Ecclesiae* grounded in the *communio fidelium*. Consequently, while fully respecting the proper power of each Bishop as pastor of the particular Church entrusted to him, Episcopal Conferences, including their regional and continental groupings, together with the relative hierarchical structures of the Eastern Churches, are presently one of the most significant means for expressing and preserving ecclesial communion in different places, together with the Roman Pontiff as guarantor of unity of faith and of communion.¹⁴

Service of the Roman Curia

8. The Roman Curia is at the service of the Pope, who, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the Bishops and of the whole company of the faithful.¹⁵ By virtue of this bond, the work of the Roman Curia is also organically related to the College of Bishops and individual Bishops, as well as to Episcopal Conferences and their regional and continental groupings, and the hierarchical structures of the Eastern Churches. All these are of great pastoral benefit as expressions of the affective and effective communion existing among the Bishops. The Roman Curia is not set between the Pope and the Bishops, but is at the service of both, according to the modalities proper to the nature of each.

9. The attention that the present Apostolic Constitution gives to Episcopal Conferences and, correspondingly, to the hierarchical structures of the Eastern Churches, is meant to enhance their potential,¹⁶ without making them intermediary instances between the Roman Pontiff and the Bishops, but instead being at their complete service. The competencies assigned to them in the present provisions are meant to express the collegial dimension of the episcopal ministry and, indirectly, to strengthen ecclesial communion¹⁷ by giving concrete expression to their joint exercise of certain pastoral functions for the good of the faithful of their respective nations or of a determined territory.¹⁸

Every Christian is a missionary disciple

10. The Pope, the Bishops and other ordained ministers are not the sole evangelizers in the Church. They "know that they were not established by Christ to undertake by themselves the entire saving mission of the Church to the world".¹⁹ Each Christian, by virtue of baptism, is a missionary disciple "to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus".²⁰ This must necessarily be taken into account in the reform of the Curia, which should consequently make provision for the involvement of lay women and men, also in roles of government and responsibility. Their presence and their participation is essential, since they contribute to the well-being of the entire Church.²¹ By their family life, their engagement in society and their faith, which helps them to discern God's working in the world, they have much to offer, especially through their promotion of the family, respect for the values of life and creation, the Gospel as a leaven of temporal affairs, and the discernment of the signs of the times.

Significance of the reform

11. The reform of the Roman Curia will be authentic and effective if it is the fruit of an interior reform whereby we appropriate “the paradigm of the spirituality of the Council” as expressed in “the ancient story of the good Samaritan”,²² the person who goes out of his way to be a neighbour to someone left half-dead on the roadside, a foreigner whom he does not even know. This spirituality has its deepest source in the love of God, who loved us first, while we were still poor sinners. It reminds us that our duty is, in imitation of Christ, to serve our brothers and sisters, especially those in greatest need, and that Christ’s face is seen in the face of every man and woman, particularly those who suffer in any way (cf. *Mt* 25:40).

12. It should therefore be evident that “reform is not an end in itself, but a means to give a more convincing witness to Christ; to favour a more effective evangelization; to promote a more fruitful ecumenical spirit; to encourage a more constructive dialogue with all. This reform, actively endorsed by most Cardinals within the General Congregations prior to the Conclave, should further clarify the identity of the Roman Curia in the assistance it provides to the successor of Peter in the exercise of his supreme pastoral office for the benefit and service of the universal Church and the particular Churches. This entails strengthening the unity of faith and the communion of the people of God and advancing the mission of the Church in the world. Certainly, it will not be easy to achieve this goal: it will require time, determination and, above all, the cooperation of everyone. To do so, we must first of all entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit, who is the true guide of the Church, and implore in prayer the gift of authentic discernment”.²³