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**THE APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION PRAEDICATE EVANGELIUM
AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROMAN CURIA
UNDER POPE FRANCIS**

Theses for the Doctoral Dissertation

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The history of the Roman Curia can be considered the history of its reforms. Pope Francis's reforms, and especially the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (PE) promulgated in 2022, provided an excellent opportunity to investigate the changes through the analysis of the new legislation and present the current organization and operation of the Roman Curia in the framework of the doctoral dissertation.

In fact, a comprehensive analysis of the institutional system of the Roman Curia has not been carried out in Hungarian so far. Theological and canon law research in Hungary has mostly examined some aspects or parts of it, often only tangentially. Manuals, on the other hand, have dealt with the Curia within the system of the Code of Canon Law, i.e. within the framework of canon law as a whole, limiting themselves to a brief description of the Curia.

The focus of our research was to study some of the main questions, and we aimed to verify or clarify our initial hypotheses related to them. The questions we asked were the following:

1. Where does PE fit into the current reform process of the Roman Curia and its broader historical context?
2. What are the most significant changes affecting the Curia as a result of Pope Francis' reforms?
3. Are the principles formulated by Pope Francis, including the guiding principle of synodality, implemented through the norms of PE?
4. Has the curial reform achieved the expected results, and is it suitable for this purpose?

Our initial hypotheses in relation to the above can be summarized as follows:

1. PE fits organically into the series of historical reforms of the Roman Curia, and in general, it follows the model of previous similar apostolic constitutions, like the 1908 *Sapienti consilio*, the 1967 *Regimini Ecclesiae universae* and the 1988 *Pastor bonus*. The apostolic constitution itself is just one of the stages of the reform carried out under Pope Francis, and it did not intend to conclude it definitively.
2. Apart from terminological changes and organizational mergers, the curial reform introduced some rearrangement of competences, and also proposed certain theoretical innovations, but did not overturn the system in force since the reform of Pius X.
3. Pope Francis firmly formulated the basic principles of his reform, which the drafters of PE incorporated into the legislation (PE Parts I-II). At the same time, the most significant principle, synodality, appears more as an encouragement in the structure and operational rules of the Curia, aiming at better utilization of existing structures.

4. The reform of the Curia is an ongoing process, and PE is only one of its, albeit significant, instruments, which in many respects did not accomplish the intended or desired changes. Nevertheless, some of the decisions contained therein may have longer-term effects on the life of the Curia and the Church (cf. cooperation with bishops and their bodies, more prominent role of the laity).

The starting point of our work was, of course, the text of the apostolic constitution PE itself. In order to make it easier to apply, we first prepared a precise Hungarian translation of the norm. During our research, we compared the new apostolic constitution with its direct predecessor, the 1988 apostolic constitution *Pastor bonus* in order to highlight the differences. At the same time, we did not fail to look back at the previous legislation, namely the 1967 *Regimini Ecclesiae universae* and the 1908 *Sapienti consilio*. The competence of the institutions of the Roman Curia covers almost every segment of canon law, therefore it was inevitable to take into account the relevant major regulations. The curial reform of Pope Francis, as we mentioned, did not take shape in a single step, but – as we summarized during our research – it consisted in numerous laws of varying level, which were summarized in the PE. Nevertheless, the reform continued after its promulgation, which our work has also considered.

We consulted the legal sources in the original language in the official gazette of the Holy See, the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*¹, and for texts not published there, we considered the Bulletin of the Holy See Press Office (*Bollettino della Sala Stampa della Santa Sede*²), which is also to be considered as an official source and has been easily searchable on the Internet since 2000. The comprehensive foreign-language analyses of the Roman Curia, as well as older and new analyses of individual areas, were very useful for our work. The scope of this mainly foreign-language literature gradually expanded and deepened in content after the simpler presentations immediately following the promulgation of PE. We have strived to use the most important works, in which we were greatly helped by the distinguished professors of the Canon Law Institute of Pázmány Péter Catholic University. I would like to express my gratitude to the President of the institute and moderator of the present dissertation, Professor Dr. Péter Szabó, who, in addition to his encouragements and improving comments, also supported our work with the latest literature, and to Professor Dr. Lóránd Ujházi, who also did not omit to indicate the constantly expanding number of publications.

¹ https://www.vatican.va/archive/aas/index_it.htm

² <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino.html>

Although we would have liked, the limits of the doctoral dissertation did not allow for a detailed description of each curial institution, including their historical background, therefore we have limited our work to only as many references to history as we deemed essential for the interpretation of the current reform process. Our approach was enriched by the public administration perspective, which can sometimes help explain those factors that seem less relevant from the point of view of canon law or theology, but in practice can have a very significant influence on the structures and their operation.

The introductory Part I of the present dissertation outlines the motives and directions of the research. Part II aims to present the historical development of the Roman Curia as the stages of a continuous process. Within this part, the first chapter briefly summarizes the 1500 years of the Roman Curia. The second chapter traces the development of the institutional structure of the Curia over the last half millennium, marked by the four great apostolic constitutions of Sixtus V, Pius X, Paul VI and John Paul II before PE itself. It is within this historical part that the dissertation also discusses the reforms of Pope Francis, which can now also be considered concluded with the death of their author. Within this third chapter, we discuss the Council of Cardinals, which can be considered the engine of the curial reform and the editorial board of PE, covering also the expectations expressed towards them at the beginning of their work. Then we go through the three main phases of Francis' reforms: the period between 2013-2018, which ended with the completion of the first draft of PE, the period between 2018-2022, concluded by the promulgation of the apostolic constitution itself, and finally the continuous adjustment measures of the years 2022-2025. The time limit of our research is 21st April 2025.

In Part III, we undertake to present Pope Francis' reform of the Curia, starting from its fundamental principles drafted into Chapters I and II of PE. Part IV of the dissertation describes the definition of the Roman Curia and its organizational structure according to PE. In the first chapter, we deal with the definition of the Roman Curia, in the second we intend to systematize the categories of its organizations (the Roman Curia in a narrower and broader sense, instrumental entities, institutions associated with the Holy See, types of curial institutions), which offers a basis for interpreting the provisions of PE. Finally, we present the organizational structure of typical curial institutions, including the categories of their staff, the remaining cardinalatial positions, and the collegial bodies.

The four chapters of Part V discuss the competences and procedures of the various institutions of the Roman Curia, with particular attention to the interdicasterial consultation mechanisms and the cooperation with particular Churches and Episcopal Conferences and the hierarchical structures of the Eastern Churches, which is definitely one of the focal points of PE. In Part VI,

we review the main variations implemented by PE within the organization and the competences of the various curial organizations. Finally, in Part VII, we formulate some considerations and conclusions in light of the lessons learned from our research, also considering the new chapter of the curial reform that starts with the actual new papacy. In the appendix to the dissertation, we publish the Hungarian translation of PE, prepared within the context of the present research in order to facilitate its knowledge by the Hungarian public.

The outcomes of our research have highlighted some remaining open questions, problems that may still require a solution or areas that can be arranged differently. Finally, we have respectfully formulated some suggestions that, in our opinion, may be useful for advancing the implementation of the reforms according to their original goals and principles (separation of certain portfolios, strengthening of special pastoral care, changes in institutional terminology). The analysis of Pope Francis' Apostolic Constitution "on the Roman Curia and its service to the Church in the world", reveals that among its basic principles mission and synodality clearly form the ecclesiological basis of the whole regulation. In our work, we therefore tried to answer the question of how much the practical impact of these principles can be traced within the changes of the curial reform, beyond a purely theoretical basis. In summary, we can state that the analysis of the aforementioned changes and novelties, especially the PE, gives us a complex picture.

1. The novelties that we can consider most visible in PE are the terminological changes, especially the renaming of congregations to dicasteries. Yet, this change did not receive explicit theoretical justification nor in the normative text, neither in the commentaries that can be considered official.³ In their analyses most authors describe this rebranding mostly as not in line with the basic principle of synodality, given that the term *congregation* means assembly, which in itself refers to a collegial type of functioning and decision-making, while the term *dicastery* rather highlights the apparatus. From this perspective, this innovation reflects in fact the actual reality of the Curia, but it cannot be considered to be much in line with the declared

³ Cf. the presentation of PE at the Sala Stampa della Santa Sede on 21st March 2022 and the papers by Mons. Marco Mellino, and now Cardinal Gianfranco Ghirlanda: *Conferenza Stampa di presentazione della Costituzione Apostolica "Praedicate Evangelium" sulla Curia Romana e il suo servizio alla Chiesa nel mondo*, in: Bollettino della Sala Stampa della Santa Sede N. B0192, 21.03.2022; GHIRLANDA Gianfranco, *La Costituzione Apostolica "Praedicate Evangelium" sulla Curia Romana*. in: La Civiltà Cattolica, Anno 2022, Volume II, Quaderno 4123, 41-56; MELLINO, Marco, *La Curia Romana alla luce della Costituzione Apostolica „Praedicate Evangelium”*. Presentazione generale, novità, tempi e modalità di applicazione. Relazione introduttiva alla Riunione Interdicasteriale del 9 maggio 2022. In: L'Osservatore Romano, 9 maggio 2022, 8-11.

principles of the PE. However, it is undoubtedly capable of creating the effect of a comprehensive reform.

2. A second quite visible change can be considered the fulfilment of the request for simplification formulated from the beginning of the reform, which was formally realized through the mergers operated in 2016 and then through PE. However, one might observe that as new tasks arose, occasional further expansions have taken place in order to deal with them (e.g. in the case of the supervisory functions affecting the economic and financial area). For some of the dicasteries created by the merger of former Pontifical Councils, the measure is obvious and justifiable (e.g. Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development), while for others, it seems that we can mainly speak of the need to comply with the principle of the “reduction [of the number] of Dicasteries” stated in PE II.11.⁴ In a specific way, this aspect is most evident in the case of the Dicastery for Evangelization and the Dicastery for Culture and Education created by PE, the functionality of which will be shown only by time. If we take into account that nominal mergers do not necessarily have a cost-cutting effect in themselves, then reducing the number of dicasteries can at most have some technical governance advantages: fewer heads of institutions need to be coordinated, or more precisely, part of the coordination is relegated within the dicasteries.

3. The third notable novelty is the greater role granted to the laity, as a further step in a process that had begun earlier. Among these, the opening of the possibility for laypeople to head curial institutions is worth highlighting (cf. PE II.5.). Yet this same provision is somewhat relativized by the text of PE itself (“...depending on the power of governance and the specific competence and function of the Dicastery or Office in question”). Furthermore, the legislator’s own words and appointment practice do not help us to understand its significance either. Understandably, one of the most intense confrontations unfolded around this point between authors who assessed it as a decisive turn and those who sought to describe it as only a minor step. We could have a glimpse on Pope Francis’ intentions from an interview in which he stated that in the case of dicasteries of a “sacramental nature” (de índole sacramental), a layperson cannot head it. In any case, PE thus brought the ongoing discussion about the relationship between the laity and power of governance, and the same nature of power of governance, to the forefront of the discussion again, but Pope Francis downplayed its significance, saying that it

⁴ According to PE there are 26 curial institutions while there used to be a total of 28 dicasteries of the same category in PB.

was a “nice debate” between cardinals and theologians.⁵ Since we do not believe that the legislator has closed the issue, we did not undertake this either, but rather limited our analysis to practical aspects of it affecting governance.

4. The fourth relevant novelty is the requirement of synodal practice for the Curia (cf. PE I.4, PE II. 3-4, 8-9.), which originally came to the fore because the heads of curial institutions explicitly called for it as one of the guiding principles of the curial reform during a 2014 meeting. They intended it mostly as a better culture of cooperation and a more efficient flow of information in order to avoid parallelisms and duplication of initiatives.⁶ This formulation does not entirely correspond to the interpretation of synodality given by Pope Francis, who rather understands it as the Christian faithful of all categories of the People of God moving forward together in community in order to fulfil the mission of the Church, that is, to realize the “missionary conversion”. It can be stated that in the field of promoting synodality – be it a culture of cooperation or a wider participation in decision-making – the text of PE does not bring much innovation. Unless we consider the requirement for cooperation with the various episcopal bodies, which in turn could in the future undoubtedly have a significant impact on the institutional culture. However, the Curia itself, proceeding within the framework of previous reforms, is to be considered less as a college of persons than as a complex of institutions, where the Prefect, or equivalent continues to have the determinant role in the work of the dicastery. One can agree with the opinion of those authors who believe that in order to strengthen synodality it is not structural transformations that are necessary since that depends mainly on the attitude of the leaders and staff of the Curia.⁷ Regarding synodality, PE therefore seems to remain more on the exhortative level, building few practical incentives into the system. Probably the General Regulations of the Roman Curia (RGCR) that are currently being updated will provide some more detailed provisions. With regard to the objective of strengthening the missionary work the apostolic constitution remains similarly at the level of general exhortation,

⁵ Ld. QUIRÓS Julián - MARTÍNEZ-BROCAL Javier, *El Papa Francisco: «He firmado ya mi renuncia en caso de impedimento médico»*, in: abc.es 17/12/2022: „Si es un dicasterio de índole sacramental, tiene que presidirlo un sacerdote o un obispo. Aunque ahí se discute si la autoridad viene por la misión, como sostiene el cardenal Ouellet, o por el sacramento, como sostiene Rouco Varela. Es una linda discusión entre cardenales, una cuestión que siguen discutiendo los teólogos.”

⁶ „...la proposta di assumere la sinodalità tra i principi ispiratori nel lavoro di riforma della Curia romana giunse insistente dai Capi Dicastero nella riunione avuta col Santo Padre il 24 novembre 2014. In quel contesto si disse che la sinodalità tra i Dicasteri è da ritenersi assai importante e dovrebbe svilupparsi nella Curia come una vera e propria cultura, aiutata da un sistema di comunicazione che consenta di sapere cosa fanno gli altri per evitare duplicati di attività e programmi.” SEMERARO Card. Marcello, *Intervento alla Conferenza Stampa di presentazione della Costituzione Apostolica “Praedicate Evangelium” sulla Curia Romana e il suo servizio alla Chiesa nel mondo*, in: Bollettino della Sala Stampa della Santa Sede N. B0192, 21.03.2022;

⁷ Cf. ARRIETA J. I., *Presupposti organizzativi della Riforma della Curia Romana*. In: *Ius Ecclesiae* XXVII (2015), N.1., 44-45.

unless our conclusion is confirmed that the evangelization/mission is precisely the area affected by the most important decentralization initiative of PE (*supporting* evangelization instead of *directing and coordinating* it, cf. PE 62). It is also true that ameliorations to the efficiency of the curial organization can in itself be evaluated as a factor strengthening the mission.

5. The fifth main set of changes can be considered the reallocation of powers between curial institutions, that aim at a more efficient operation and thus at strengthening the mission of the Curia and the Church itself (cf. PE I.12.). This can be assessed more as a way for supporting the mission of the Roman Pontiff – and the service of the bishops – which was perhaps the most important aspect also for previous curial reforms, showing a clear trend of continuity. On the other hand, the results of PE are not unequivocal in this area either: in addition to several reasonable changes, some missed opportunities are also evident, of which the most spectacular is the fragmentation of the responsibility for charitable and humanitarian activities between three or four dicasteries. We can add that curial reforms should never be interpreted in the dimension of perfection/imperfection, but rather reflect the specificities of the tasks considered, as well as the opportunities allowed by the current situation.

Considering the historical stages of the development of the Roman Curia, we can state that major reforms were induced by influences coming from two different directions. One was the development of external, so to speak political circumstances: this justified the institutionalization and development of the Curia itself at the end of antiquity, then during the "Avignon Papacy" – in many respects emulating the courts of Constantinople and the Holy Roman Empire – and finally with the fall of the Papal States, with the *Sapienti consilio* of 1908. The other main influence can be identified in the internally driven reform processes, with popes willing to apply the reform of the Church to the Roman Curia as well: this motivated the changes of the 11/12th Century Gregorian reforms or that of the 1588 *Immensa aeterni Dei*, then the *Regimini Ecclesiae universae* of 1967, but also the *Pastor bonus* of 1988. That is to reform the Curia in accordance with the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council (including the new Code of Canon Law). In both cases, there was a common aspiration to improve efficiency and morality, which is a recurring element of all minor and major Curia reforms.

Pope Francis' reform, epitomized by PE, reveals a different perspective. Although he repeatedly referred to the implementation of the Second Vatican Council and the ongoing change of epoch in the world, his goal was to make the reform of the Roman Curia a prototype and laboratory for the reform of the Catholic Church itself. This explained the widespread enthusiasm expressed by certain circles (inside and outside the Church) following the first steps of the curial reform, which turned into higher expectations for some kind of a reform of the Catholic Church

itself. The Pope also fuelled these expectations by placing the reform of the Church and the Curia in a similar interpretative framework with the expression *semper reformanda*: both the Church and the Curia must be constantly reformed, which is also evident in the “missionary conversion” and synodality formulated as key objectives. Increasing efficiency and the moral factor this time were present in the form of provisions aimed at protecting minors and strengthening financial and management transparency.

The balance of the realization of the goals set by Pope Francis’ reforms seems to be mixed. The refinement of the institutional framework has always been a task for the pope of the time, so in this case further adjustments would be certainly implemented by Leo XIV.⁸ Who, in his first statement on the subject, aptly summarized the lesson of all curial reforms: “I Papi passano, la Curia rimane”,⁹ that is the Popes pass while the Curia remains.

⁸ As Professor Regoli put it wisely: „L’aspetto più importante delle riforme, però, non è la loro elaborazione, bensì la loro applicazione.” cf. REGOLI Roberto, La costituzione “Praedicate Evangelium” (2022) dal punto di vista dello sviluppo storico della Curia Romana, in LOVISON Filippo (ed.), Missionari insegnamenti. Scritti in onore di P. Fidel González Fernández mcccj in occasione dell’80mo genethiaco, Roma, Missionari Comboniani del Cuore di Gesù – Provincia della Spagna, 2025, 494.

⁹ LEO XIV PP., *Discorso agli Officiali della Curia Romana, ai Dipendenti della Santa Sede, del Governatorato dello Stato della Città del Vaticano e del Vicariato di Roma*, 24.05.2025, in: BSS N. B0339, 25.05.2025.