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Pope creates commission to study activities, mission of Vatican bank

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Pope Francis has created a five-person commission to review the activities and mission of the Vatican bank.

The new pontifical commission, which includes two U.S. members, reflects the pope's desire to ensure the bank's activities are in harmony with the mission of the universal church and the Apostolic See, said a Vatican communique published Wednesday.

The communique, issued by the Vatican Secretariat of State, said the commission's aim is "to collect information on the running of the Institute" for the Works of Religion, the formal name of the Vatican bank, and to then present the results to Pope Francis.

The commission, which has already begun its work, is part of the pope's larger efforts to reform the central offices of the church, the statement said.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, told reporters that members of the College of Cardinals had asked the new pope "to work on how the central government of the church works and he's doing so with great commitment, using instruments that he finds helpful to get the information he needs to make his decisions and exercise his responsibilities."

While the bank "will continue to function according to its current statutes," Lombardi said, the papal commission will help the pope decide if reforms are necessary and whether they are "reforms in the way the bank operates or reforms of other kinds."

The commission, which includes Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard law professor, and Msgr. Peter Wells, a top official in the Vatican Secretariat of State, is to have wide and unencumbered access to all "documents, data, information," the Vatican said.

The pope authorized the commission's creation Monday with a document called a "chirograph," a brief writing on a very limited subject.

In the new document, Pope Francis said issues of confidentiality and other restrictions "will not inhibit or limit" the commission's access. However, the commission will have to do its job in a way that does not interfere with "the norms that safeguard the autonomy and independence of the authorities who supervise and regulate the institute."

The pope said he was acting in continuity with a 1990 reform of the bank ordered by Blessed John Paul and a call by Pope Benedict XVI "to allow Gospel principles to permeate economic and financial activities, too."

The document said the commission was created in consultation with various cardinals, bishops and others, as well as "in light of the need to introduce reforms in the institutions that assist the Apostolic See."

In February, Pope Benedict appointed German industrialist Ernst von Freyberg as president of the bank. The president told reporters in May that he was surprised to find so few problems in the bank's operations, which convinced him that the biggest problem the bank faces is its reputation.

Lombardi said Pope Francis' establishment of the commission does not cast doubt on Freyberg's statements or on his responsibilities at the bank under the current statutes.

The commission members "will not be making technical checks on the (bank's) operations. Freyberg is in charge of technical, operational matters and making sure they are done correctly," he said.

In establishing the new commission, Lombardi said, "the pope is raising a broader question, which is the relationship between this institution -- its reality, the way it functions -- and the framework of the mission of the church and the Holy See. These are two distinct things."

"The commission could end up saying the bank functions well," he said, while still questioning whether it is "necessary for the governance of the church. These are two separate questions," the spokesman said.

The commission will cease to exist once members conclude their work, giving the pope their findings and handing over to him the entire archive of materials they collect, Pope Francis wrote. He did not, however, mention a time frame or deadline for the work.

The papal document said the commission will rely on the collaboration not just of the bank's departments and personnel, but also of the heads of all Vatican congregations, councils and offices, as well as their members and staff.

Pope Francis named as president of the commission Italian Cardinal Raffaele Farina, retired head of the Vatican Library and Vatican Secret Archives, and as coordinator of the commission Bishop Juan Ignacio Arrieta, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts.

The other members of the commission are Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and a member of the cardinals' commission that oversees the bank's operations; Glendon, who serves as president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences in addition to teaching at Harvard; and Wells, a priest of the archdiocese of Tulsa, Okla., who will serve as commission secretary.

Pope Francis said the commission members also can call in experts or consultants for assistance.

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