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Pope Francis has created a new commission to study the ordaining of women as deacons in the Catholic Church, the Vatican announced April 8.

The new group, composed of 12 members, appears to replace the earlier study commission on the issue, which the pontiff had instituted in 2016. None of the members of the earlier group have been appointed to the new commission.

Francis had promised at the end of the October 2019 Synod of Bishops on the Amazon region that he would be instituting a new commission on the issue, but the April 8 announcement was unexpected.

The previous commission had been instituted at the request of the Rome-based global umbrella organization of the world's Catholic sisters and nuns. Francis gave the organization a report on the group's work in May 2019, saying the commission had been unable to come to agreement about the role of women deacons in the early centuries of Christianity.

Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi, the archbishop of L'Aquila in Italy, will serve as the president of the new commission. Cardinal Luis Ladaria, the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, had served as the president of the last

commission.

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Petrocchi will be assisted by a secretary, Fr. Denis Dupont-Fauville, who is a staffer at the doctrinal congregation. The other 10 members, five of whom are women, come from Ukraine, the U.S., Spain, Great Britain, Switzerland, Italy and France.

The two members from the U.S. are: Dominic Cerrato, a deacon of the diocese of Steubenville, Ohio; and James Keating, a deacon of the archdiocese of Omaha, Nebraska, and director of theological formation at Creighton University's Institute for Priestly Formation.

The appointment of deacons seems to indicate the new group will be taking a new tack than the previous commission, which did not include any deacons. Its members had all been theologians of long-standing. New president Petrocchi, notably, does not have a doctorate in theology.

The other members of the new commission:

- Catherine Brown Tkacz, a Ukrainian-American author with a doctorate in medieval studies from the University of Notre Dame;
- Fr. Santiago del Cura Elena, a Spanish diocesan priest with a doctorate in theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University who has previously served as a member of the International Theological Commission;
- Caroline Farey, a British theologian with a doctorate from the Pontifical Lateran University who is a lecturer in philosophy at St. Mary's College, Oscott, the Seminary for the Archdiocese of Birmingham, England;
- Barbara Hallensleben, a Swiss dogmatic theologian and professor at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland;
- Fr. Manfred Hauke, a German diocesan priest on the University of Lugano's faculty of theology who focuses on Mariology;
- Msgr. Angelo Lameri, an Italian diocesan priest who teaches theology at the Pontifical Lateran University and is a consultor to the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments;
- Rosalba Manes, an Italian consecrated virgin and professor in biblical theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University; and,

- Anne-Marie Pelletier, a French biblical scholar who has taught at the Université Paris-Nanterre and was the first woman to receive the Ratzinger Prize in 2014.

The question of the ordination of women as deacons has emerged as something of an ideological battleground for the Catholic Church in recent years.

Although Pope John Paul II said in his 1994 apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* that "the Church has no authority whatsoever" to ordain woman as priests, many church historians have said however that there is abundant evidence that women served as deacons in the early centuries of the church.

The apostle Paul mentions such a woman, Phoebe, in his letter to the Romans.

In his May 2019 meeting with the umbrella group of women religious, Francis said the original women deacons commission had disagreed about the role of those early women deacons.

"They came to a certain point," said the pope. "Everyone agreed. Then, each had his or her own idea."

Some on the original commission, he said, thought the church "must go forward" and reinstitute an order of women deacons. Others, he said, "say we must stop here."

It is not immediately clear how many of the members of the new commission have studied issues surrounding the ordination of women as deacons.

Tkacz, the expert in medieval studies, has authored at least one paper on the matter. An abstract of that paper, available online, describes the author concluding that women deacons in the early centuries of the church were "ontologically different" than male deacons.

Francis first promised to study the issue of women deacons in a May 2016 meeting with the women religious group, known formally as the International Union of Superiors General.

The pope committed to creating a commission during a closed-door question-and-answer session with the sisters, which NCR was the first outlet globally to report on. An NCR columnist, theologian Phyllis Zagano, served on the pope's first women deacons commission.

Francis is known to have consulted with the international union in considering names for the first commission. It is unknown if the pontiff did so again for the new group.

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