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Pope Francis appointed two new undersecretaries for the Vatican's office of the Synod of Bishops Feb. 6, tasking an Augustinian priest and a Xavierian sister to share duties as the department's second-in-command leaders.

Spanish Fr. Luis Marín de San Martín and French Sr. Nathalie Becquart will be the synod office's first dual undersecretaries since its creation in 1967.

Xaviere Missionary Sister Nathalie Becquart attends a news conference at the Vatican in this

Xaviere Missionary Sister Nathalie Becquart attends a news conference at the Vatican in this Oct. 9, 2018, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Although the Vatican bulletin announcing the move listed the two synod appointments together, it also said Francis had chosen to make San Martín a bishop.

The office of the Synod of Bishops is primarily tasked with helping organize synod meetings, which bring hundreds of Catholic bishops to Rome every few years to discuss topics chosen by the pope.

The status of women who take part in those meetings has emerged as an issue of debate in recent years. Although women have been appointed to synods in non-voting capacities as auditors or experts, none has yet served as a full voting member.

Cardinal Mario Grech, the head of the Synod office, seemed to suggest in an interview with the in-house outlet Vatican News after the new appointments that Becquart would now be a voting member at future synods.

"With the naming of Sr. Nathalie Becquart and her possibility of participating with the right to vote, a door is being opened," said Grech, according to the original Italian version of the interview.

The Vatican's English translation of the interview appeared however to soften Grech's language, with the cardinal mentioning "the possibility that she will participate with the right to vote."

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San Martín is a theologian who did his doctoral work on the ecclesiology of Pope John XXIII. He had been serving as the assistant general of his order and as president of the Rome-based Augustinian Spirituality Institute.

Becquart is a former director of the French bishops' vocation office, was an organizer for the 2018 synod on young people, and has been a consultor to the synod office since May 2019.

Francis has held four synods during his eight-year papacy, with the last being the 2019 regional gathering for the nine-nation Amazonian region. The next, set to focus on synodality, is scheduled for October 2022.

Theologian Luigi Gioia praised the pope's appointment of Becquart as one of two undersecretaries.

"Synodality is at the heart of Pope Francis' ministry and will be crucial to this legacy," Gioia, a research associate at the University of Cambridge, told NCR. "Therefore, the nomination of Sr. Nathalie Becquart is all the more significant."

"Acknowledging this however should not blind us on the fact that we are far from a rehabilitation of the Church as the people of God which … is so dear to Pope Francis," said the theologian. The representation of laypeople and women at the synod "remains insignificant," Gioia added.