Vatican



St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican is seen from a street in Rome. (Unsplash/Shai Pal)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — March 22, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis' newly released apostolic constitution, which is intended to reform the Vatican's central bureaucracy, has been praised as a breakthrough by church leaders and theologians for expanding the roles laypeople can exercise in the Catholic Church, even while it remains unclear how the shift in church governance will take place.

At a March 21 Vatican press conference two days after the publication of the new constitution, Jesuit Fr. Gianfranco Ghirlanda, a distinguished canon lawyer and former rector of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, said that in the new document, the "power of governance in the church does not come from the Sacrament of [Holy] Orders," meaning ordination, but instead, from "canonical mission."

The constitution's new structure of Vatican offices eliminates previous distinctions between Vatican congregations and councils, with the newly streamlined title of "dicastery."

The change in nomenclature, said Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago, signals substantive changes ahead.

While the title of "congregation" meant that Vatican offices heads would be prelates, "the word dicastery allows an opening where laypeople can be involved in decision-making and have deliberative authority in the life of the church," Cupich told NCR.

Natalia Imperatori-Lee, a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College, said this could mean a "redefinition of the theology of the priesthood that laypeople have been calling for since Vatican II."

> 'Even though we've been clamoring for this for a long time, it is going to be a messy transition.'
>
> —Natalia Imperatori-Lee
>
> Tweet this

"To separate out governance or administration from orders means that orders is primarily a sacramental ministry and that governance then belongs to the whole people of God, which is as it should be," she said.

Similarly, Christian Weisner of the German church reform organization We Are Church, praised the expansion of potential lay leadership roles as representing a "substantial shift" for the Catholic Church.

This, in his estimation, "could and should be a model for the whole church" to split organizational leadership, which he noted needs certain professional qualifications, from "spiritual leadership by ordained male and female persons," he told NCR.

While Weisner said the new constitution also means greater opportunities for women religious, he said that whenever possible, it should also include "fathers and mothers with experience in family life."

"A real modern and adequate reform of the Curia presupposes, quite in principle, a basic ecclesiastical law, which has been successfully prevented since Vatican II," he said.

Weisner also noted that under the new reforms, the Pontifical Commission for Child Protection will now be located under the newly reorganized Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

He noted this will give the group "more authority," but said actual effectiveness will depend on the extent to which child protection is prioritized throughout the entire Roman Curia. A former commission member has already expressed concern that the body has lost its independence.

Kerry Robinson, a partner of the Leadership Roundtable, told NCR via email that she believes the new reforms provide "the opportunity for the church to benefit from the co-responsibility of women and men — ordained, religious and lay — at the highest levels in the Vatican," and that it makes concrete what Pope Francis has been calling for throughout his papacy: "true synodal and servant leadership."

Leadership Roundtable, which was founded in the wake of the abuse crisis in the United States, has spent much of the last two decades working with dioceses to

promote a model of co-responsibility between ordained and lay people as a best practice for church governance.

"We are encouraged that the church is listening," said Robinson of the new constitution.

Yet despite the enthusiasm from multiple corners of the global Catholic Church, Imperatori-Lee offered a warning: "Even though we've been clamoring for this for a long time, it is going to be a messy transition."

Already the rollout of the document has been the source of some consternation from both Vatican watchers and lay men and women. Despite the global composition of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics, the constitution was only released in Italian and without a clear timeline as to when other translations will be made available.

Advertisement

Moreover, "the church," said Imperatori-Lee, "has relied on underpaid labor for a really long time," primarily because clerics have been responsible for running many of its institutions, where health insurance costs and retirement benefits were provided by a religious community or a diocese.

If the Vatican wants to recruit highly trained lay men and women to come work in the Vatican, she said, "it's going to get very expensive."

This means the Vatican will become even more dependent on philanthropy, she predicted, and warned that it will have to be especially on guard against catering to ideological preferences of church donors to avoid outside influence or mission creep.

Cupich said the new constitution makes clear that in every Vatican department — and for those who work in them — the "role of evangelization, of being missionary, is the nature of the church."

"I think all of these dicasteries are going to have to have an internal examination of how they see their work as being evangelical," he said.



Pope Francis talks with Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich at the Vatican Dec. 12, 2019. (CNS/Vatican Media)

That examination includes the Congregation — now Dicastery — for Bishops, the influential Vatican department that advises the pope on which Catholic priests to appoint as bishops across the world.

Cupich has served as a member of the Congregation for Bishops for the last five years, and, he told NCR, has now been appointed for another five-year term on the dicastery. He said the decision-making process for the appointment of new bishops, the creation of new dioceses and the ongoing formation of bishops must be reevaluated to answer "how evangelization is furthered in that work."

The new constitution, he added, also makes clear that "we're not just having clerics involved in the selection of bishops, but we're involving laypeople."

He also observed that the constitutional reforms have particular resonance for national episcopal conferences, which he says must now play a "greater role" in the selection of bishops, dealing with problems locally and intervening in cases when a bishop acts in a way that "breaks communion" with the pope.

"The episcopal conference has a role of stepping in and doing something before the Holy See becomes involved," said Cupich, who noted that he hopes the U.S. bishops' conference will have discussions of their own practices in light of the new constitution.

While the reforms will take effect on June 5, Cupich said the potential effects of the document are already noticeable — and will be felt for some time to come.

"I think that this is the most significant document from Rome that has to deal with the implementation of the [Second Vatican] Council," he told NCR. "I would even go as far to say there is a possibility in the future that people will speak about the 'Franciscan reform' of the church and the Roman Curia. It is that significant of a document."

A version of this story appeared in the **April 1-14, 2022** print issue under the headline: Vatican reforms a breakthrough for laypeople.