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Pope Francis greets Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, during the

Pope Francis greets Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, during the sign of peace as he celebrates Mass marking the feast of the Epiphany in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Jan. 6, 2020. (CNS photo/Paul Haring).



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Rome — January 30, 2023
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Pope Francis on Jan. 30 accepted the resignation of Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops and appointed Chicago-born Augustinian Bishop Robert Francis Prevost, currently serving in Chiclayo, Peru, to head the influential Vatican office responsible for recommending priests to be named bishops.

Prevost, 67, previously served as prior general of the Augustinians and holds degrees from both Villanova University and the Catholic Theological Union in the United States, as well as a doctorate in canon law from the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome.

Since the mid-1980's, he held a number of missionary postings in Peru, and in 2014, Pope Francis appointed him as bishop of the Chiclayo Diocese in the country.

In 2020, Francis appointed him as a member of the then-Congregation for Bishops, which meets regularly in Rome to vet candidates and advise the pope on nominations to the episcopacy. Prevost had long been rumored as a successor to Ouellet, who was first appointed to lead the office under Pope Benedict XVI.

Over the last 12 years, Ouellet, 78, has played an outsized role in shaping the Catholic hierarchy throughout the world.

Widely viewed as a theological conservative — and rumored to be *papabile*, meaning likely to be a contender for the next pope, in both the conclaves of 2005 and 2013 — Ouellet is known as a vocal defender of the celibate, all-male Catholic priesthood.

At the same time, he has backed Francis' reforms to allow for greater lay leadership in the Roman Curia and defended the pope against the now-disgraced former Vatican ambassador to the United States, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, who, in 2018, called on Francis to resign over his handling of abuse. At the time, Ouellet characterized Viganò's actions as a "political frame job" and "extremely immoral."

In an interview with NCR in 2022, Ouellet said that priests not in communion with Francis should ask "'What am I doing here?'"

In recent months, however, the Canadian cardinal has been plagued with accusations of sexual misconduct by at least two women in the Quebec Diocese, which he ran from 2002-2010.

Ouellet has denied the allegations and in an extremely rare move, sued one of the complainants for defamation, seeking $100,000 in damages that he pledged to donate to supporting Indigenous victims of clergy abuse.

Prevost's appointment marks the second departmental shake-up since the release of the new Vatican constitution, which took effect on June 5 and reorganized the church's central bureaucracy.

Several other major Vatican departments are led by individuals over the traditional retirement age of 75 or have served past their 5-year mandates, including Spanish Cardinal Luis Ladaria of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In his new role, Prevost, who served for over 30 years in Peru, will also serve as president of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, which is situated in the

Dicastery for Bishops. The office was launched by Pope Pius XII in 1958 with a mission to study questions related to the "life and development" of the various churches in Latin America, home to nearly 40% of the world's Catholic population.

Prevost will take over his new duties effective April 12.