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Consolata Missionary Sr. Simona Brambilla was appointed prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, on Jan. 6. She is pictured here speaking at a news conference at the Vatican March 14, 2024, about study groups authorized by Pope Francis to examine issues raised at the synod on synodality. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Pope Francis on Jan. 6 appointed the first ever female to lead a Vatican department, continuing an ongoing trend of this pontificate to place more women in leadership in the Catholic Church.

Consolata Missionary Sr. Simona Brambilla will serve as prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Vatican office that works with religious orders and their members.

The announcement comes three years after Francis formally overhauled the Vatican's constitution allowing for women and laity to offices of the Roman Curia.

The appointment also comes at the conclusion of the pope's global synod process, which acknowledged that "women continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining a fuller recognition … in all the various areas of the church's life." Even so, critics have countered that there are still too few concrete efforts to promote women in positions in authority in church life.

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Brambilla, 59, is an Italian-born missionary and nurse who previously served in Mozambique. She also holds a doctorate in psychology from Rome's Gregorian University.

In 2023, she was appointed as the department's secretary, marking the first time in Vatican history that a woman was named the number two official of the curia. Previously, she had served as an external member of the department.

Also appointed on Jan. 6 was Salesian Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime, 65, who will serve as the pro-prefect of the dicastery, the office's number two official. The office oversees nearly 700,000 consecrated women and men from religious orders around the globe.

In her new role, Brambilla will now top a growing number of women that Francis has elevated to high ranking posts in the Vatican. Included in that number are Emilce Cuda, secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America; Salesian Sr. Alessandra Smerilli, secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; and Xaviere Sr. Nathalie Becquart, who is the under-secretary of the Vatican's synod office.

In the immediate wake of Brambilla's appointment, Becquart — who has become one of the most visible public faces of the synod — took to social media to celebrate the announcement: "Wonderful news!," she wrote.

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