Vatican

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In this Thursday, Dec. 23, 2021 file photo, Pope Francis shakes hands with Sr. Raffaella Petrini, secretary general of the Vatican's governorship, as he arrives for an audience with employees in the Paul VI Hall, at the Vatican. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Another woman is taking over a top management job in the Vatican: Sr. Raffaella Petrini, an Italian nun, was named Saturday as president of the Vatican City State, making her essentially the governor of the 44-hectare (108-acre) territory in Rome that is home to the Catholic Church.

Petrini, 56, had previously been the secretary general of the Vatican administration, which among other things is responsible for the city state's infrastructure and the Vatican Museums, a major source of revenue for the Holy See. She moves into the top job on March 1 following the retirement of Cardinal Fernando Vérgez Alzaga, who turns 80 that day.

Pope Francis had previously announced Petrini's promotion, part of his effort to place women in decision-making roles in the Vatican to serve as models for the rest of the church. The Vatican officially published the appointment Saturday while the pope was hospitalized with a respiratory tract infection.

Last month, Francis named the first woman to head a major Holy See office, appointing another Italian nun, Sr. Simona Brambilla, to become prefect of the department responsible for all the Catholic Church's religious orders.

While women have been named to No. 2 spots in some Vatican offices, never before have women been named to the top jobs of the Holy See Curia or Vatican City State administration.

Catholic women have long complained of second-class status in an institution that reserves the priesthood for men. Francis has upheld the ban on female priests and tamped down hopes that women could be ordained as deacons.

But there has been a marked increase in the percentage of women working in the Vatican during his papacy, including in leadership positions, from 19.3% in 2013 to 23.4% today, according to statistics reported by Vatican News. In the Curia alone, the percentage of women is 26%.

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Critics complain that making women managers of the church doesn't compensate for the continued ban on ordaining them as ministers.

In addition to her job running the Vatican City State administration, Petrini also serves as one of three women who are members of the Vatican office that vets bishop nominations. When they were named in 2022 it marked the first time women had had a formal role in the Vatican process of selecting bishops.

A member of the Meriden, Conn.-based Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist religious order, Petrini otherwise keeps a relatively low public profile.

But during a 2023 Women's Day speech at Rome's Pontifical Holy Cross university, she acknowledged that her nomination as secretary general of the Vatican City State had raised eyebrows, "more than I expected in my ingenuity."

"Even in non-ecclesial organizations, resistance is part of the process of change," said Petrini, who has also been a professor of welfare economics at Rome's Pontifical Angelicum University.