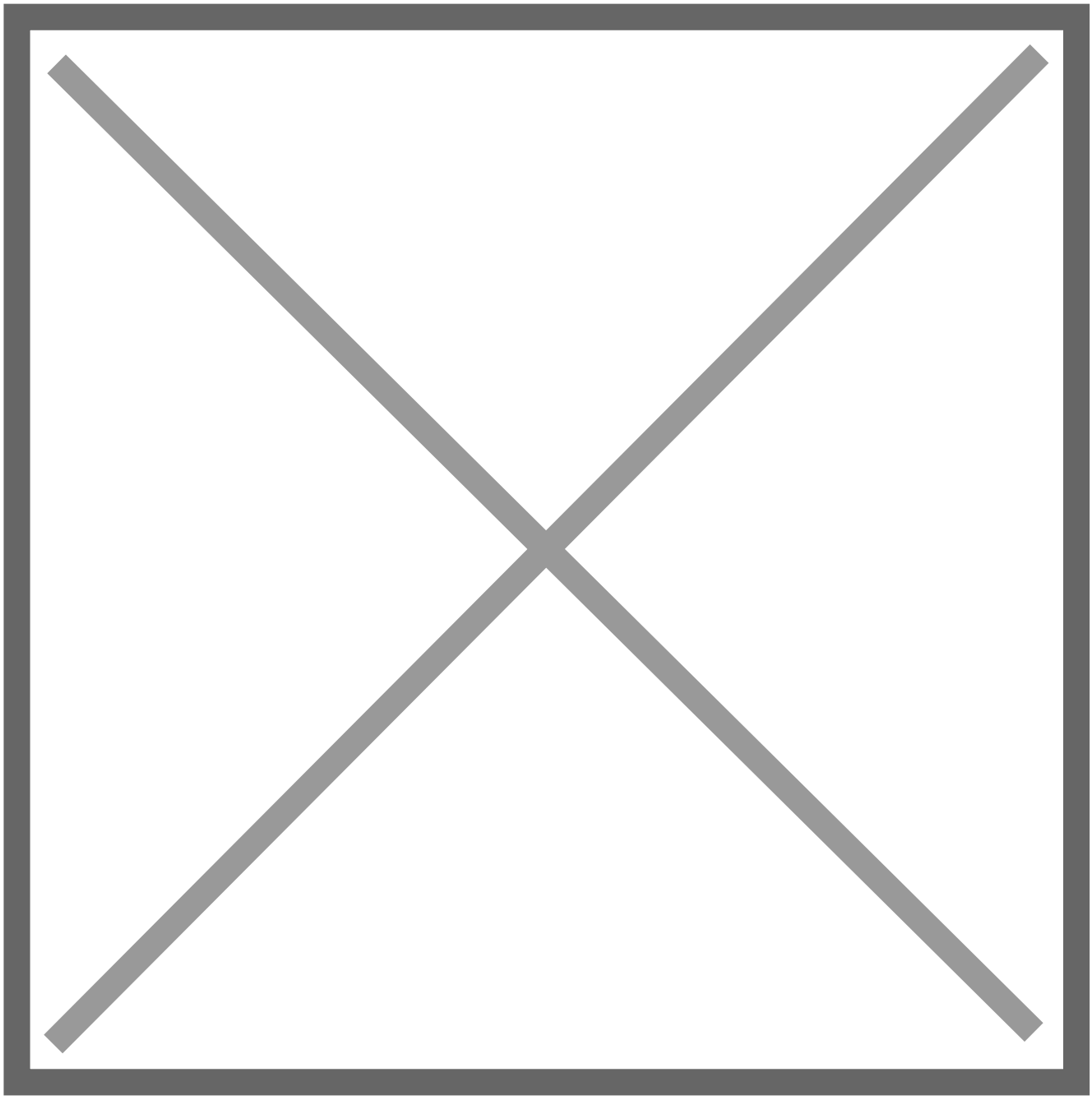
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Pope Francis poses for a photo with the 35 students enrolled at the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, the Vatican school for training diplomats, and with academy staff in this file photo from June 7, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Pope Francis has raised the status of the Vatican's diplomatic academy to an institute of higher learning that will issue academic degrees while also strengthening its focus on evangelization.

The pope's changes to the status of the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy were set out in a document signed by him and released at the Vatican April 15.

The Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy was founded by Pope Clement XI in 1701 to prepare young priests to enter the diplomatic service of the Holy See, serving as nuncios, in the Vatican Secretariat of State and in other roles around the world.

The academy will offer its students — still all priests — degrees equivalent to a master's and a doctorate in "diplomatic sciences."

The papal diplomats play a vital role "in the constant effort to bring the closeness of the pope to peoples and churches," Francis wrote. "They are the custodians of that solicitude which moves from the center to the peripheries, to make them sharers in the church's missionary outreach, and then to lead them back to that center with their needs, reflections and aspirations."

The priests' training, the document said, includes studies in law, history, politics and economics, as well as languages.

But in renewing the academy, the pope said, "care shall be taken to ensure that the programs of instruction have a close connection with the ecclesiastical disciplines, the praxis of the Roman Curia, the needs of the local churches and, more broadly, with the work of evangelization, the church's activity and its relationship with culture and human society."

Francis already had made one important change to the academy, deciding in 2020 that every priest preparing for service in the Vatican diplomatic corps must spend a year in ministry as a missionary.

Mission experience, he had said, would be helpful "for those who in the future will be called to collaborate with the pontifical representatives and, later, could become envoys of the Holy See to nations and particular churches."

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Currently students — all already ordained priests — usually spend four years at the academy in central Rome. They earn a license in canon law from one of the pontifical universities in the city and then a doctorate in either canon law or theology. If they already hold a doctorate, then their time at the academy is only two years.

In addition to their university courses, the students study diplomacy, Vatican diplomatic relations, languages, international law, papal documents and current affairs.

Vatican diplomats represent the Holy See to individual countries around the world as well as to international organizations, such as the United Nations. But they also represent the pope to the local Catholic Church and coordinate the search for new bishops.

The document specified that "the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy is, to all intents and purposes, an integral part of the Secretariat of State, within which it operates and to which it is specially attached."

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the secretary of state, told Vatican News that the nuncios and other diplomatic personnel "are the watchful and lucid eye of the Successor of Peter on the church and the world, committed to representing the pope with a

missionary spirit that knows no boundaries."

"They not only participate in international debates, but are called to interpret and propose, in line with the church's Christian vision, solutions that can contribute to the building of a more just and fraternal world," the cardinal said.

A papal diplomat is called not only to be an expert in negotiation, but also "a witness of faith, committed to overcoming cultural, political and ideological barriers and building bridges of peace and justice," the cardinal said. "This approach enables the church to develop concrete paths for peace, for freedom of religion for every believer and for order among nations, always having in mind Christ's mission and the good of all humanity."

In addition to nuncios who are or became cardinals, five popes were alumni of the academy: Popes Clement XIII, Leo XII, Leo XIII, Benedict XV and Paul VI.