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Cardinal Kevin Farrell, "camerlengo" or chamberlain of the Holy Roman Church, announced the death of Pope Francis from the Domus Sanctae Marthae, where the pope lived, at the Vatican April 21, 2025. Standing with him are Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state; Archbishop Edgar Peña Parra, substitute for general affairs of the Secretariat of State; and Archbishop Diego Ravelli, master of papal liturgical ceremonies. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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With the death of Pope Francis April 21, the practical aspects of overseeing the day-to-day needs of the church and organizing a papal election fall to U.S. Cardinal Kevin Farrell.

Standing in the chapel of Francis' residence, it was Farrell who announced to the world that the pope had died.

The 77-year-old, Irish-born former bishop of Dallas, Texas, has been "camerlengo" or chamberlain of the Holy Roman Church since 2019, although the job was basically just a title while Pope Francis was alive.

Since 2016 he has served as prefect of the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life. But Francis gave him other big jobs to handle simultaneously: he has been the sole administrator of the Vatican's pension fund since November 2024; president of the Vatican Committee for Investments since 2022; and president of the Commission for Confidential Matters, mainly involving financial contracts, since 2020.

Now Farrell's responsibilities range from ensuring that nothing is touched or tampered with in Pope Francis' rooms in the Domus Sanctae Marthae to selecting the technicians who will sweep the Sistine Chapel for electronic bugs, cameras and recording devices.

As chamberlain, Farrell is the only person who may authorize the photographing of the pope's dead body, but only for documentary purposes and only with the body dressed in pontifical vestments.

As chamberlain the cardinal takes temporary charge of the church's affairs until a new pope is elected. His first duty was to ceremonially certify the death of the pope.

According to rules set by St. John Paul II in 1996, Farrell was to seal the pope's office and bedroom and take possession of the Apostolic Palace and the papal palaces at St. John Lateran in Rome and at Castel Gandolfo, south of the city.

In consultation with senior cardinals, he makes the arrangements for the pope's funeral and sets the date for the beginning of the meetings necessary to prepare for the conclave.

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The chamberlain also is responsible for preparing the cardinals' rooms in the Vatican's Domus Sanctae Marthae guest house. The rules about what happens when the papacy is vacant specify that he is to be assisted by the "cardinals" who served the previous pope as secretary of state and as head of the office governing Vatican City State.

But Francis' most recent choice to lead the city-state government is not a cardinal. Pope Francis appointed Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist Raffaella Petrini as president of the office March 1. It was not immediately clear whether she would be part of the preparatory commission since she is not a cardinal.

While the office of pope is vacant, the chamberlain presides over what are called "particular congregations of the cardinals." In addition to the chamberlain, the particular congregations include three cardinals chosen by lot. The chamberlain's assistants serve for three days, then are replaced by three other cardinals chosen by lot.

The group of four deals with "ordinary affairs" not requiring the discussion and consent of the entire College of Cardinals, which meets under the presidency of the college's dean, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re.

The particular congregation is the only body empowered to decide whether a reason exists for anyone in the conclave to communicate with anyone outside the gathering.

Farrell and his rotating board of three cardinal assistants also are responsible for giving approval to the individuals chosen to serve as priest-confessors, doctors and domestic staff for the cardinals in the conclave.

The chamberlain, with two masters of ceremonies, is responsible for administering an oath of secrecy to the non-cardinals whose service is needed by the conclave.

Under John Paul's 1996 rules, at the end of the conclave, Farrell also is required to write up a report on the results of each ballot cast, place it in a sealed envelope and give it to the new pope after he is elected.

Although his role in the preparation and work of the conclave is key, the chamberlain's duties end inside the Sistine Chapel with the election of a new pope.

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.