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Archbishop Filippo Iannone, Prefect of the Dicastery for Legislative Texts, attends an interview with the Associated Press at the Vatican press room, March 25, 2023. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

by Associated Press

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Pope Leo XIV made his first big Vatican appointment Friday, naming an Italian legal expert to replace him as head of the Holy See's office that vets bishop nominations around the world.

Leo named Archbishop Filippo Iannone as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops. Leo, the former Cardinal Robert Prevost, had headed the important Vatican office for two years until his election as pope in May.

Iannone, 67, is currently the Holy See's top legislator, as head of the Vatican's legal office. His transfer, thus, creates another important position Leo will have to fill.

That could be part of the thinking behind the appointment: Leo, who is himself a canon lawyer, may have ideas of reforms for the church's legal system, and may want to put in place someone of his own choosing who can execute that vision.

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Leo also knows that, ultimately, decisions about nominations of bishops rests solely with the pope. In announcing Iannone's transfer, Leo also confirmed the existing No. 2 and 3 official in the Dicastery of Bishops, essentially leaving in place the bureaucratic structure that he had in place when he was prefect.

The appointment also suggests that Leo knows well that the bishops office has a significant legal caseload. Among other things, it evaluates complaints against bishops of abuse or negligence in handling cases of abusive clergy.

After the death of Pope Francis, all Vatican prefects technically lost their jobs. Leo confirmed them provisionally, and there are several positions that are due to be vacated soon with prefects near or at normal retirement age.