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Seated next to Pope Francis, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, president of the Center for Research and Anthropology of Vocations and retired prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, speaks at an event in the Synod Hall at the Vatican March 1, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
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Acknowledging "unease" among some members of the church around giving laypeople senior positions in the Vatican, a high-ranking cardinal published a rare note defending Pope Francis' decision to place nonordained people at the highest levels of the Roman Curia.

The former prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, wrote in an article published in Vatican News on Feb. 16 that having bishops and cardinals serve in roles under laypeople and consecrated religious persons "would not be inappropriate or questionable" so long as the nonordained appointees are

competent.

The publication of such a note through official Vatican channels is unusual and suggests that the debate over the role of laypeople in church governance remains alive within the Curia.

Some Vatican watchers have taken the publication to mean that the appointment of laypeople to lead one or more Vatican dicasteries is imminent.

The cardinal noted that "at the dawn of the new pontificate, some would like to see the close link between the ordained ministry and the function of governing the Church reaffirmed."

Yet, Ouellet wrote, the link between the office of a bishop and the function of governing in the church as laid out in Second Vatican Council "does not mean that the sacrament of Holy Orders is the exclusive source of all government in the Church."

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Francis' 2022 reform of the Curia opened the way for laypeople and professed religious to lead dicasteries, the various departments of the Vatican that make up its internal structure.

Though the Dicastery for Communication has been led by a layperson since 2018, the late pope subsequently named Sr. Simona Brambilla to lead the Vatican office for consecrated life and Sr. Rafaella Petrini to oversee the governance of Vatican City State.

Pope Leo XIV later moved to regulate Brambilla's situation, since a Vatican law still held that the president of the microstate's government had to be a cardinal. That signaled that Petrini's appointment would not be peeled back.

Citing canon law, Ouellet said that the lay Christian faithful are already entitled to "cooperate in the exercise" of church governance.

"This does not mean entrusting them with tasks that are strictly sacramental in the Christological sense, but rather integrating their charisms into the service of the Holy Spirit," he wrote, referring to one's unique capacities endowed by grace.

Those charisms, the cardinal wrote, "have their own weight of authority in areas where sacramental ordination is not necessary, where it may even be appropriate for competence to be of another order," such as in human resource management, administering justice, handling finances and engaging in ecumenical dialogue.

Making the case for authority endowed by an individual's God-given capacities rather than holy orders, Ouellet wrote that when the pope names someone to a leadership position "he is entrusting a person recognised as competent at a certain level of ecclesial experience, by virtue of a charism, with a higher responsibility that remains framed and guaranteed by the Holy Father's overarching jurisdiction over the Roman Curia."

That is to say, under Francis' reforms, even if a senior Vatican official isn't a bishop it's OK since the pope remains the boss.

"I have no doubt that Pope Francis' gesture is promising for the future, as it marks the beginning of recognition of the authority of charisms by hierarchical authority," the cardinal wrote.

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