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Pope Leo XIV addresses cardinals gathered for the opening working session of his second con

Pope Leo XIV addresses cardinals gathered for the opening working session of his second consistory in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican June 26, 2026. On June 20, the Vatican announced Leo's appointment of Sr. Alessandra Smerilli as prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Pope Leo XIV has named Sr. Alessandra Smerilli prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, the Vatican announced June 30, making her the latest woman elevated to lead a major Vatican office under the new pontificate.

The pope also appointed Cardinal Fabio Baggio as pro-prefect of the same dicastery, with special responsibility for the Laudato si’ Higher Education Center. Smerilli and Baggio will take up their new roles Sept. 1, 2026.

The pairing of a woman religious as prefect alongside a cardinal as pro-prefect echoes a leadership model first introduced by Pope Francis, who in January 2025 named Sr. Simona Brambilla prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, with Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime serving alongside her as pro-prefect.

Smerilli, a member of the Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco, succeeds Cardinal Michael Czerny, 79, the Czech-born Canadian Jesuit who has led the dicastery since 2022. She has served as the dicastery's secretary since August 2021, when she became the first woman appointed to that position in a Vatican dicastery.

The June 30 appointment marks the second time this month that Leo has placed a woman at the head of a Roman Curia dicastery, following his June 2 appointment of Montse Alvarado as prefect of the Dicastery for Communication.

"The work of our dicastery is to accompany all the local churches, always aware that everyone needs development, and that peripheries are not only geographical," Smerilli said in comments to OSV News last year. "Our mission is not just to bring the Church to the margins, but also to bring the margins to the center — to ensure that the voices of the peripheries are heard."

She has also spoken often of the Church's responsibility to manage its resources openly.

"Financial transparency is fundamental for the credibility of the Church as a missionary institution," she said.

An economist by training, Smerilli holds a doctorate in political economy from Rome's La Sapienza University and a doctorate in economics from the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. She is a full professor of political economy at the Auxilium Faculty of Education and has taught at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, LUMSA University in Rome, the Pontifical Salesian University and the Pontifical Lateran University.
Sister Smerilli entered religious life with the Salesian Sisters in 1997 and began working with the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development in April 2020, coordinating the Task Force Economy of the Vatican's COVID-19 Commission. Pope Francis named her interim secretary of the dicastery the following year and confirmed her in the post in December 2021, then appointed her full secretary in April 2022.

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Baggio, a member of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo, has spent much of his ministry focused on migration. He directed the migration department of the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires and later led the Scalabrini Migration Center in the Philippines before serving as undersecretary of the dicastery's Migrants and Refugees Section beginning in 2017. Francis elevated him to cardinal in the consistory of Dec. 7, 2024.

Also announced June 30 was the appointment of Msgr. Jozef Barlaš, a Slovak priest of the Archdiocese of Košice, who has worked in the Vatican Secretariat of State's Section for General Affairs, as undersecretary of the dicastery.

The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development was established by Francis in 2016 through the merger of four pontifical councils dealing with justice and peace, migrants, charitable works and healthcare. Its mandate spans issues including human rights, disarmament, the environment, and care for refugees, prisoners, and victims of conflict and trafficking.

Smerilli's appointment continues a trend toward greater inclusion of women in Vatican governance that began under Francis, who in addition to naming Brambilla also appointed Xavière Missionary Sr. Nathalie Becquart as undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops, making her the first woman with voting rights in a synod in 2023, and Paloma García Ovejero as the Vatican's first female deputy spokesperson.

Leo has signaled he intends to continue that legacy. In May 2025 he confirmed Sr. Raffaella Petrini, a Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist, in her role as president of the office governing Vatican City State, and in February he named Vincentian Sr. Nina Benedikta Krapic deputy director of the Holy See Press Office.